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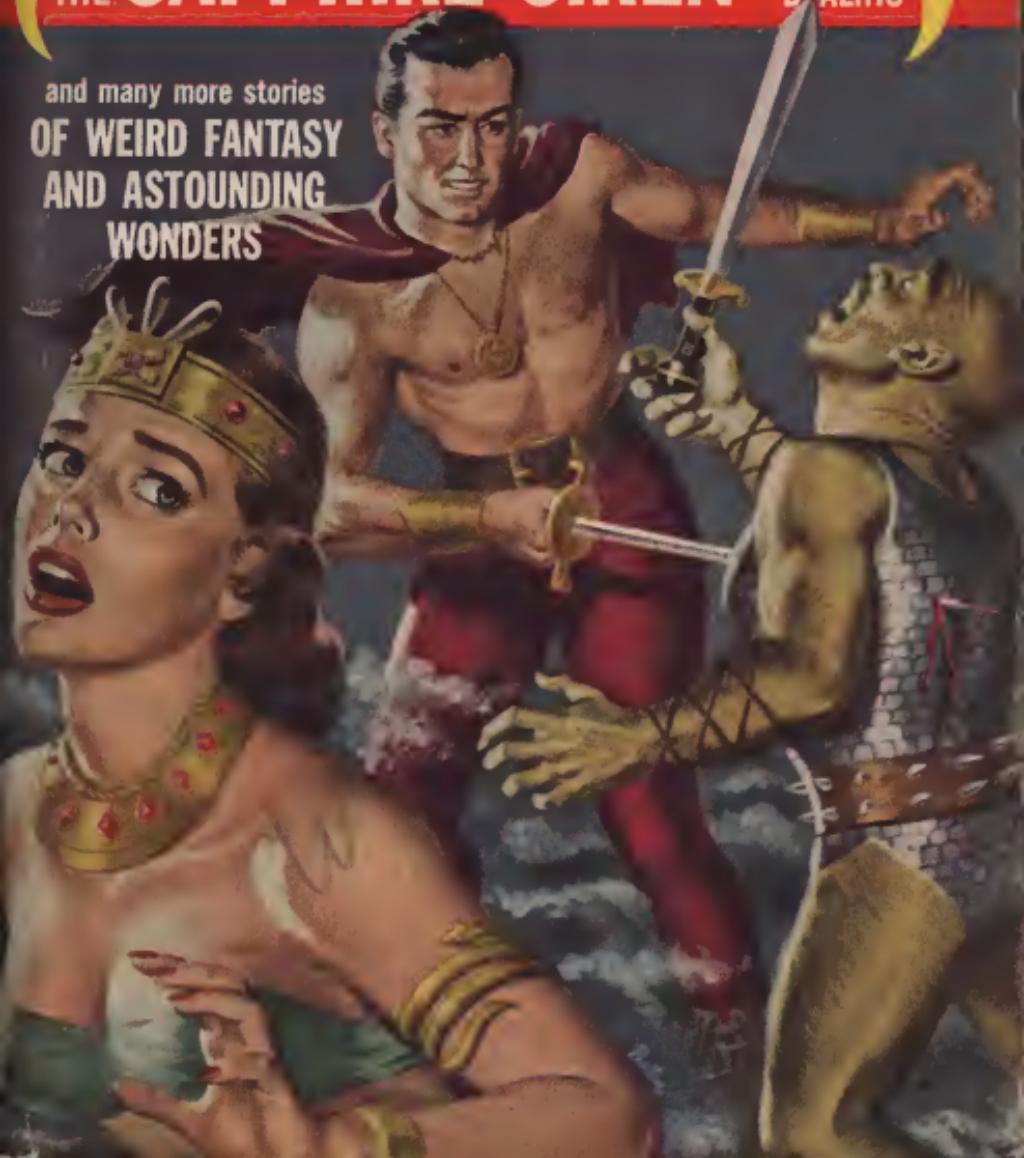
# AVON Fantasy

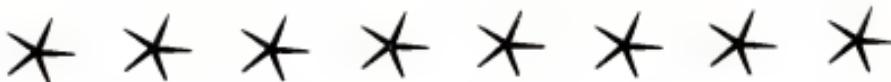
READER No. 17

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WONDERS





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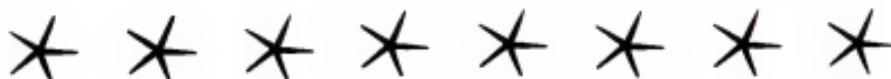
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—D.A.W.



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# FANTASY READER

No. 17

*Edited by*

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NICTZIN DYALHIS

RAY BRADBURY

G. K. CHESTERTON

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H. P. LOVECRAFT and E. HOFFMANN PRICE



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# *The Sapphire Siren*

*by Nictzin Dyalhis*

*A surprisingly large section of the populace believes in the existence of another world, invisibly about us, having its own rules and laws, populated by individuals and beings of varying degrees of monstrosity. I refer to the occultists, those who conjure up ghosts and talk learnedly of elementals. So it should require no stretch of the imagination to conceive of a world invisible to us, but all about us, in which men and women live and in which live also those other "things" occultists speak of. Nictzin Dyalhis has written an exciting and fantastic adventure story of a man who lived a dual life, one in this world and one in "that" one. Those who know this author only through his classic interplanetary novelette, When the Green Star Waned, will find him equally exciting in this different ultramundane sphere.*

**S**UICIDE as a means of escaping trouble never appealed to me. I had studied the occult, and knew what consequences that course involved, afterward.

But I was fed up on life. I was destitute, and had no friends who might help, even were I to appeal to them. At forty-eight, one does not easily regain solvency. And, gradually, I'd lost all ambition. Not even hope remained.

If only there were some other road out—a door, for example, into the hypothetical region of four dimensions . . . it certainly couldn't be worse there than what I'd borne in the last three years. Well, I could try. . . .

I seated myself cross-legged on the floor. If I concentrated hard enough, perhaps the miracle might occur . . . at least I should have tried . . . a last resort. . . . Gradually a vague state ensued wherein I was not unconscious, for I still knew that I was *I*; yet a queer detachment was mine—there was a world, but of it I was no longer a part. . . .

*Click!*

Like a movable panel a section of the wall opened, revealing a most peculiar corridor—a strange Being stood smiling at me. It did not speak, yet I caught the challenge: "Dare you?"

With a single movement I rose and stepped into the opening. . . .

Oh, the agonizing, excruciating torment of that transition! Every nerve, tissue and fiber flamed and froze simultaneously. My brain seethed like a superheated cauldron. My blood turned to corrosive, searing acid. Tears suffused my aching eyes. I choked, unable to utter the groans my sufferings constrained me to emit. . . .

Had I landed in Hell? It certainly seemed so! . . . Then abruptly it was all over, I was still *I*, yet vastly different. I was *free*—and with senses above the dull senses of Earth, with power beyond Earth's muscular strength. I realized that I was in a different realm where the Laws were strange to me, and that I must be careful lest I be caught in some trap from whence escape might not be so easily achieved. But where, I wondered, was the Being who had dared me? . . .

"Here!"

"But—you seem not the same . . . there was a vague, misty, red haze—now you are distinct. . . ."

"Many high-speed light-waves formed a veil through which earthly eyes can not see clearly."

"Hence—the agony during transition?"

"Precisely! The vibrations altered your atomic structure. But you are still your true self."

"Perhaps," I assented. "But who are you, and why did you make it possible for me to come?"

"I am Zarf; and your subjects need you, to say naught of—"

We were interrupted by a most discordant howling, and abruptly some two dozen hideous dwarfs surrounded us. They bore long straight swords, were clad in iridescent scale armor, stood about five feet in height, and had the ugliest faces I ever saw.

"King Karan of Octolan—and the commander of his bodyguard, Zarf!" Their voices were shrill with maniacal glee. Evidently they considered our capture a big event.

I did not like their looks. I did not approve of their air of insolent triumph. Back on Earth I had lost all material ambitions, but suddenly I regained one, and proceeded to realize it.

With all my new strength, I drove my clenched right fist into the face of a particularly burly dwarf standing about two feet away. His head snapped back, he went limp; I snatched his sword from him and set to work. Once and again I struck, caught the true balance of the weapon and saw a head leave its body—shouted:

"A sword for you, Zarf!"

Before the blade touched ground he caught it, then set his back against mine. . . . A wild delight filled me, yet through it I felt a vague wonder—where had *I* learned swordsmanship? For never on Earth had I held one in my hand!

Those dwarfs fought like fiends from Hell. More than once I felt the

stinging kiss of dwarf steel. Once I heard Zarf gasp as a sword bit deep, and once he groaned in agony. It was a wild mêlée while it lasted; and never did I enjoy myself more. . . . Through a red haze of slaughter I saw that only two dwarfmen remained facing my blade. Lunge—slash—parry—slash and lunge again—but one left—I gathered myself—dimly saw another blade than mine pass through that last dwarf—heard Zarf as from a far distance crying exultantly:

"Lord King, you fight even better than in the other days! It is well—for you will have many a fight ere you sit once more on the Chrysolite Throne of your race."

Then I slid to a limp heap on the ground, exhausted from loss of blood—I could not speak—heard Zarf cursing furiously, virulently; then all consciousness flickered out. . . .

I regained my senses slowly. I lay on a pallet, a hand's breadth off a hard-packed earthen floor. A feeble lamp barely showed walls of stone chinked with moss and mud. Obviously a hut—but where? Then I saw Zarf. He sat on a low stool, chin on fist, elbow on knee, head bandaged, and his left arm in a sling. Looking at myself, I saw I was swathed worse than he in bandages.

"Zarf," I said weakly. "We look as if we'd been in a fight!"

"We have been," he nodded at cost of a twinge of pain. "But none of those Vulmins will ever take part in another—while we were just getting a little practise!"

"Zarf," I demanded, insistent. "Who are you, and why did you call me 'Master'? Surely there is some mistake. You know that I am but an Earthman upon whom you took pity and opened for him a door into this realm of Space. . . ."

Somberly he stared at me; then:

"King Karan, what pity was in the hearts of those Vulmin dwarf-devils when they strove to cut us into gobbets for their cook-pots? Yet they knew you and named you 'Karan of Octolan, Zarf's royal Master'. Is it possible you have no memory of the past—no knowledge of who and what you are? Do you not remember the rebel sorcerer, Djil Grm, who blasted your body and drove your self through a bent corridor down to the Earth, where you acquired a new body as an Earthbabe? Have you no recollection of your Imperial Consort? Shall that regal lady—so loved by all in your far-flung realm that she was deemed a goddess—be unavenged?

"What disposal that accursed sorcerer made of her, none knows. It is known that he sought to seduce her, and when she withstood him in that, she vanished! Yet sure I am he did not force her to the Earth, for then you twain might have found each other, and so defeated his major purpose. Nay, King Karan, she is *here!* In the nights her spirit whispers to mine:

"Zarf, I am still your Queen. Find my lord, wheresoever he be . . .

watch over him . . . whenever possible, open for him a door. He will find me—free me—out of his love. . . .

"King Karan, must that regal lady's spirit wait in vain, believing Zarf a traitor and you a recreant spouse?"

"*I can not remember,*" I groaned. I was convinced—believed Zarf fully; and oh! the anguish that was mine in that moment! Amnesia, it is called back on Earth, this inability to remember, with its concomitant of lost identity. . . . Then in the gloom of my mind, one insurmountable objection reared its ugly head, "If this sorcerer blasted my body, and drove my self down to the Earth, where through the medium of birth I regained a body and grew to my present stature—how shall any here recognize me as Karan the King of Octolan? Zarf, I still say you must be mistaken."

"My King," he replied pityingly, "you *are* sore bemazed! On Earth your body was shapen by parental influence; but *here*—when the agony shook you, the body reassembled about the self in its true semblance and substance. Nay! Karan of Octolan you are, and none who ever saw you during your reign would deny your identity, albeit there be many who would gladly slay you to prevent you from regaining your throne.

"Lord, evil rules where once was good—and a fair, happy land has become a veritable antechamber of Hell. Vampyr and ghoul prey on the bodies of your people. Foes assail them from without, and devils plague them from within the borders. Your subjects, afraid, disheartened, hopeless, have fallen from their allegiance to the Karanate Dynasty. Scarce may we find a hundred loyal souls in all the eight provinces of Octolan. I myself am but a fugitive; and rich is the reward Djl Grm would pay for the head of Zarf the Proscribed! And as for our gracious Queen, Mehul-Ira——"

He groaned in heaviness of spirit; and I felt two scalding tears run adown my cheeks.

"*I can not remember,*" I wailed. "Karan I may be, but I have not his memory! A great King would I be, and a wondrous leader—with Karan's body and an Earthman's mind!" And I sank back on my bed all atremble from sheer, impotent fury at myself.

Zarf pondered for an interminable while; then:

"Lord, it would seem that Djl Grm, ere he drove your self to the Earth, laid an inhibition on your memory-coil. And if so, we may be sure he will never release it. But, Lord, it comes to my mind that afar from here dwells another magician—Agnor Halit—fully as evil as Djl Grm, and also fully as powerful. It may well be that he can restore your memory—but it remains to be seen if he will. It is said that they hate each other as only two sorcerers can hate. And in that lies our hope. I think we would do well to start as soon as we are fit to travel, seek out this Agnor Halit, and try to enlist his aid."

"So be it," I assented. "Only, we start at dawn. Are we women, that we should lie at ease because of a few scratches?"

"But you are weak from your wounds," he objected.

"No more so than are you," I retorted. "As I say, we start at dawn. If I am indeed your King, it is for me to command—yours to obey! But for tonight, we sleep—if it be safe to sleep here."

"You will never be safe," he replied, "waking or sleeping, until you are once again on the Chrysolite Throne, surrounded by your own bodyguards. Still, we can take some small precautions to prevent a complete surprise."

He picked up a metal basin and two sticks, with which he rigged a device against the door, which would fall and make a noise were the door tampered with.

"There," he grunted. "Now we can sleep—and we need it!"

The clatter of the falling basin awoke me. I came erect, sword in hand, although I was wavering on my feet. Zarf looked at me in pity, but said naught. Slowly the door swung open, and a most grotesque visage peered in. Zarf audibly sighed his relief.

"Come in, good Koto," he invited soothingly, as one might speak to a timid child. "King Karan will do you no harm. Nor will I." And out of the corner of his mouth Zarf muttered—"Koto owns this hovel. He is a Hybrid, born of a lost woman of the Rodar race and an Elemental of the Red Wilderness. Yet Koto is very gentle and timid. Nor is he such a fool as he looks, for when I told him your identity, the poor creature wept because his hovel was no fit abode for royalty, even in distress. All his life long, Koto will be proud—"

"These 'Rodars'?" I asked, softly. "And this 'Red Wilderness'?"

"The Rodars? Gigantic savages, running naked. Gentle enough, and with child-like brains; and the Red Wilderness is a vast and dreary desert, all yours, but totally worthless."

"Enter, good Koto," I commanded. "I, Karan, King of Octolan, bid you enter and kneel before me."

With a snivelling howl the poor wretch of a Hybrid blundered in awkwardly and flopped asprawl before me. He grasped his head in both ape-like paws, looked at Zarf out of terror-filled eyes, opened his ugly gash of a mouth, and emitted a raucous howl. In a perfect paroxysm of fright he gabbled:

*"I knew it! I knew it! This hut is unfit for King Karan the Splendid! And now he will cut off Koto's head with his sword—cut off Zarf's head, too, King Karan! He made me take you in—"*

"But you are mistaken, good Koto," I assured the poor fellow. "I have no intent to cut off your head—nor Zarf's."

Then I tapped him on the shoulder with the flat of my blade.

"Rise, Baron Koto, Lord of the Red Wilderness and of all the Rodar-folk that therein dwell. Thus I, Karan, reward your service in giving us succor in our need!"

Zarf became angry at the audacity of my act. To him it was nigh to an insult to the entire order of knighthood. Then, abruptly, he laughed.

"Lord," he gasped, "had another than yourself wrought thus, I'd slay him with my own hand. But such pranks were ever your wont in the other days. Mad as is this one, still it may yet serve you well. You are too weak to travel, despite your bold heart, and we needs must wait in this castle of Baron Koto's until strength returns to us both. Perchance by then Koto may be able to secure for us riding-beasts on which we may travel faster than on our own legs."

At that last argument I capitulated. It was a good reason for waiting. But then I began to question Zarf about our intended journey.

"What manner of territory must we traverse, once we start? What sort of inhabitants dwell along our ways? Savage, or civilized? Wild, tame? Hostile or friendly? And will our swords be sufficient for our protection?"

"It will be a long and dangerous trip," he replied soberly. "Our way lies across this same Red Wilderness you just presented to Koto; thence across the Sea of the Dead, where evil ghosts arise from the foul waters; then over the Hills of Flint to the Mountains of Horror, where demons and vampyrs abound; and thence onward again to a city of devils who adore the lord of all devils. There, if we are fortunate, we may hope to find the sorcerer we seek."

"Cheerful prospect!" I commented acridly. "But are these assorted Hell-spawn sufficiently solid to be cut with good steel, or are they immune to injury?"

"Some are solid enough, while others are intangible, yet dangerous for all that. And there be various tribes of savages, none friendly to strangers. Oh, we may anticipate a most enjoyable trip!"

"Zarf," I demanded abruptly, thinking longingly of the guns and pistols of Earth—"Can you return me to Earth for a brief visit, and then bring me back here, together with certain heavy bundles? Also, can you provide me with gold or gems in quantity?"

"Lord," he mourned, "naught have I to give you saving my life and my love. Nor gold nor gems do I possess, or you should have all with no need of asking. Nor can I return you to Earth—but why do you so suddenly wish to go?"

I explained, and he understood, but reiterated his inability to do as I requested.

"Those '*gbnnz*,'" he marveled, enviously—"What a pity we have them not. Throwing-spears and knives are our nearest approach."

"Koto," I interrupted Zarf, a new idea arising in my mind. "Do you have a wood that will do like this, when seasoned?" I drew my sword, bent it in an arc, and let it spring swiftly back.

Koto nodded, then shambled from the hut. I heard sounds of wood being split, and presently Koto was back with a long strip of hard wood which he handed me deprecatingly. I was overjoyed, for it was precisely what I needed.

"Bows and arrows," I exulted. "Now I feel better! Zarf, we have reason to remain here for a while."

Rapidly I explained, using a pointed stick to make clear my meaning, by drawing in the dirt of the floor. I had been an archery enthusiast on Earth, and knew my subject, even if I had never handled a sword.

Despite my earlier urgency, it was three weeks before we three men set forth from Koto's castle on the edge of the Red Wilderness. Three men, because Koto had protested with lugubrious howls that he wasn't going to be left behind. I'd made him a Baron, he claimed, and it was his right to ride with me when I went forth to war! Zarf chuckled in grim approval, and I, too, endorsed Koto's claim.

We rode the queerest steeds imaginable. Huge birds they were, more like enormous game-cocks than aught else I can compare them to; with longer, thicker spurs and bigger beaks. Ugly-tempered, too. Zarf said they'd fight viciously whenever it came to close quarters. And how those big birds could run!

I asked Koto where he got them, and he replied that he'd gone out one dark night and taken them from a flock kept by a petty lordling some distance away. When I laughed and called him a thief, he said seriously he was no such thing:

"Was not Karan the King in need of them? And did not the kingdom and all that therein was belong to the King?"

So we rode forth, all three mounted and armed with short, thick, powerful bows and thick, heavy arrows. Zarf and I had the swords we had taken from the Vulmins, and Koto bore a ponderous war-club fashioned from a young tree having a natural bulge at the big end. Into this bulge he had driven a dozen bronze spikes all greenish with verdigris—a most efficient and terrible weapon, if he had the courage to use it in hand-to-hand fighting. Zarf maintained that Koto would be so anxious to please me that he'd fight like a maniacal fiend, should the opportunity present.

The crossing of that Red Wilderness was no pleasure jaunt. There were dust storms and blistering heat by day, and an icy wind o' nights that howled like all the devils of Hell let loose. But in time we came to the shore of the Sea of the Dead; and a most fitting name it was for that desolate body of putrescent water.

Dull grayish-greenish water, sullenly heaving and surging to and fro sluggishly and greasily; beaches of dull grayish-brownish sands; and huge dull grayish-blackish boulders and rocks—oh! a most nightmarish picture, taken all in all.

"Zarf," I shuddered, "may it not be possible to ride around this Sea?"

"Perhaps," he returned, dubiously. "But we can cross it in one quarter of the time it would take to ride around."

"But," I quiered skeptically, "how shall we cross? I see no boats, nor any way of making any."

"I have heard of a tribe hereabouts," he replied slowly, "and it may be that we can barter for, seize, or compel them to make for us a craft that will bear us over this pestilential sea. But now we had best think about making camp for the night."

We rode back from the beach until the sea was lost to view—and smell. A pleased cry from Koto finally caused us to halt. Where a mass of boulders had been piled up by some ancient cataclysm, there was a cave-like recess sufficiently large to afford safe refuge for all three of us and our mounts.

What had pleased Koto particularly was the presence of a lot of lumps resembling amber, but of a queer red color. After he had collected sufficient to satisfy his ideas, he laid a line of the stuff across the entrance, and set fire to them. They burned like coal or gum, and gave off a clear pale white flame, and a most pleasant odor, with no smoke.

"This region is infested with devils at night," Koto said seriously. "But no devil will ever dare pass that line of fire."

He was right. No devil did pass, but after darkness came, a lot of them tried. Failing in that laudable attempt, they drew anigh the opening, and stared in avidly at us. . . .

We divided the night into three watches. Zarf and I wrapped ourselves in our cloaks and slept, nor did aught disturb our rest. But Koto, when he wakened me, said he had seen plenty of devils moving about beyond the line of fire. Then he rolled himself up, and so became immovable. But I, hearing no snores, grew suspicious of such somnolence, considering that he had snored like a thunderstorm incarnate since we started from his castle. Finally I tricked him into betraying himself. With a jerk of my head I summoned him to my side.

"Koto, do you think your King unfit to keep guard, that you lie awake?"

"Lord," he replied, "there be many devils about, and some be very dangerous—tricky, too. I know their ways better than you do, and can better cope with them. Also, I await the greatest one of all, for I would talk with him on a certain matter."

"Your father, Koto?"

"Yes, my King. Koto sent him word by a lesser devil, and he will surely come."

"Koto," I demanded sternly, "would you betray your King?"

"Nay, I seek to serve my Master." He stared at me in hurt surprise. Ashamed of my suspicion, I made amends.

"I thank my Baron! Koto, have I your permission to see this father of yours?"

"So be it," he assented, after pondering the matter for a while. "But first I must tell him, or he will be angry."

A long interval passed. Out of the blackness beyond the fire two enormous crimson eyes glared balefully. Koto calmly arose, stepped across the glowing line of the Fire of Safety, and walked off in the darkness toward

those glowing orbs. A thousand misgivings assailed me. I strained my eyes, but could see naught. Even the crimson eyes had vanished. Only one comfort did I have—if harm came to Koto, his howls would surely apprise me of his danger. So I strained my ears, but no faintest whisper came. Then, after an eon of suspense, Koto calmly returned, and muttered:

"Now if King Karan wishes to see Koto's father—come! He is very terrible to behold, but he has promised Koto that King Karan shall be unharmed. But do not awaken Zarf—yet!"

It took all the hardihood I could muster to step across the line of fire and walk out into that fiend-infested dark. Koto minded it far less than I. There was evil in the very air. Strange, terrible faces stared at me, half-heard voices moaned and gibbered in my ears, clammy hands grasped at my arms and clothing, yet could not hold. Once a pair of icy cold lips kissed me full on my mouth; and oh! the foul effluvium of that breath! . . . Abruptly, Koto halted. A huge mass of black stood against the murky blackness of the night barred further progress. We stood immovable, waiting—for what? After a bit I grew impatient, weary of standing like a rock, and reached for my sword.

"Well," I demanded of Koto. "What is this holding us here? And where is this mighty father of yours? I am minded to try my sword on this black barrier and find out if it be impassable."

Before he could reply—the black barrier was not! Only, two eyes that were crimson fires of hellishness were staring into mine from a distance of mere inches . . . no face, no form . . . just vacant air—and two eyes. With a snort of disgust, I turned my back to the phenomenon.

"Koto," I said severely, "I am Karan, rightful King of Octolan. I am not interested in child's play, nor am I to be frightened by any Elemental, devil, goblin, or fiend in all my realm. I am *their* King as well as yours! Let this father of yours show respect, or we return to our shelter. . . ."

A Being stood facing me! It was taller than Koto or I, albeit no giant. Yet I knew that an Elemental was capable of assuming, at will, any form it might choose. Its features were wholly nonhuman; at the same time its expression was in nowise repulsive, nor was it fear-inspiring. But there was unmistakable power and mastery stamped thereon and shining in its great, glowing eyes.

It was staring at me coldly, impersonally, with no sign of hostility, friendlessness, or even curiosity; and I stared back at it with precisely the same attitude. If it sought to overawe me, it was badly mistaken. Then I realized it was telepathically reading my soul. And strangely, I began to grasp some insight into its nature, likewise.

"Truly, you are King Karan of Octolan, returned to regain your own. And I, to whom past, present and future are one and the same, tell you that you will succeed in all you undertake. Aye! And more than you now dream. And because you have treated Koto as a man, and will eventually make of

him one of whom I may yet be proud, I will transport you, Koto, that grim Zarf of yours, and your mounts as well, across the Sea of the Dead, and beyond the Hills of Flint. But across the Mountains of Horror you three must fight your own way. Certain powers of Nature I control, and naught do I fear; but there is an ancient pact between that magician whom you seek, and me. Therefore I will not anger him by taking you into his realms, uninvited.

"Yet this I tell you for your further guidance—he will demand of you a service. Give it, and all shall go well with your plans. Refuse it, and all the days of your life you will regret that refusal. At dawn, be in readiness, and I will carry out my promise. Fear not, whatever happens, for my ways are none that you can understand, even were I to explain them. And now, farewell till dawn!"

And with that—I stood, facing nothing! Koto's father had simply vanished.

Returning to the cave, we found a badly worried Zarf awake and cursing luridly. But he became considerably mollified when I explained, although he shook his head dubiously regarding Koto's father and his proffered assistance.

"His aid will more likely get us in trouble than help us out of it," he grumbled. "Still, as no better course presents, I suppose we will have to accept and run all chances."

At the first flush of dawn we were mounted and waiting. We noted that the air held a peculiar quality, indescribable, yet familiar, somewhat like the odor caused by a levin-bolt striking too close for comfort. Also, there came a strange, murky tinge in the air—a faint moan—icy winds—a howling, shrieking, roaring fury like all the tormented souls in Hell voicing their agonies—sand, dust and small pebbles tore past us—the world abruptly vanished, together with my companions, so far as I knew—naught remained—I was choked by dust and my eyes were blinded—I was dizzy and bemazed—I knew not for certain if I were alive or dead and buried—acute misery was the sole thing I was conscious of.

My mount stumbled and fell asprawl. I lurched to my feet, gasped, retched violently, and presently felt better. I stared about me, bewildered. Zarf and Koto were just scrambling to their feet, and facing us was Koto's father. And the great Elemental had a smile on his lips, and in his eyes a light of actual friendliness.

"Lord Karan, back of you are the Sea of the Dead and the Hills of Flint; and before you lie the Mountains of Horror. I have kept my promise to the King my son follows and honors. Farewell."

And before I could voice my gratitude, he was gone—as seemed a habit with him. One instant visible, then—vacancy!

"I know much about my father," Koto said slowly. "But I never knew he could do this."

A faint trail ran down into a wide valley, on the far side of which loomed the mighty ramparts of the Mountains of Horror. And they merited the appellation. They were evil, and evil dwelt in them.

Soon the dim trail became a wide road, albeit ancient and in dire need of repair. I do not believe it had been traveled for ages, until we came; the natural conclusion being that whatever race built it had passed into oblivion, leaving their handiwork to mark their passing.

As the day drew to its close, the road led us into the ruins of an ancient city. Not one stone stood atop of another. We decided to camp there for the night, and while Koto pitched camp and prepared a meal, I strolled about the ruins.

Everywhere I looked were slabs that were covered with petroglyphs. Whatever the race, they had had a written language, and moreover, they had been prone to embellishment. They must have been, like the old Egyptians, dominated by a priesthood, to judge by the character of the many pictures illustrating the graven text. But if those same pictures were aught to go by, their gods must have been born from a union of a nightmare and a homicidal maniac's frenzy! It gave me the chill creeps just to look at those pictures, so foul and unholy were the rites and acts depicted.

It was during my watch. My companions snored in a most inharmonious concert; and while I was in nowise asleep, I had drifted into a sort of reverie. Slowly I became aware of a pair of eyes gleaming with opalescent lights, staring across the fire at me. Thinking it might be Koto's father, I spoke low-voiced in greeting. But as no reply came, I grew angry and asked who it was and what it wanted. Again no reply, so I snatched up my short bow and drove an arrow beneath those glowing orbs.

A silvery laugh was my only reward. A hard-driven arrow is no laughing matter, but anything could happen in this accursed land, I decided.

"The little death-wand has no power to harm me," a voice asserted in those same silvery tones. "Nay, O Stranger; how may you slay one who died ages ago—but who still lives—and rules?"

"So that little 'death-wand' may not slay you," I snarled. "Well, we'll see what this will do!" And my sword leaped in a whistling cut across the tiny fire. Had there been a head and body there, they must have parted company! But the blade encountered—air!

Across the fire, smiling indulgently, as might one tolerantly amused by the tantrums of an otherwise interesting child, there sat a resplendently beautiful woman, a vivid, gorgeous brunette, with a slightly greenish tinge shimmering over her slender gold-bronze hued body. Her attire, a merest wisp of some pearly glimmering gossamer fabric, accentuated every personal charm of her exquisite form.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

"A Princess of Hell I am, yet having dominance here on this region, likewise. Ages ago I ruled in this city when it was in its height and glory.

But there arose among the priests a mighty magician whose power became greater than mine. Quakes and fire and flood he loosed upon me and my people—and we became that which no more is—yet destroy us wholly he could not.

"So it is but a city of ruins you now behold, wherein, as ghosts, my people dwell; and I, a ghost, too, abide with them part of my time, and rule over a ghostly people and a wrecked city."

"If you are a ghost, you look like an extremely tangible one," I stated bluntly.

"Yes?" and she laughed in derision. "Was it an 'extremely tangible' ghost against which you tried two different death-wands? Still you are correct, in part. I am tangible enough now, as you may prove for yourself, should you care to do so. I build my body as I need it, or revert it to vapor when its use is over. Child's play, to my magic, O Stranger. . . . You disbelieve? See!"

She arose, a vision of alluring loveliness, passed deliberately through the fire, and seated herself at my side so closely that I could sense the magnetic radiations of her.

"You may touch me, take me in your arms if you will, kiss my lips till your blood is aflame, and cool your ardor in my embrace, nor shall you find me unresponsive!"

Her rounded arms stole about my neck like soft, satiny serpents.

"So," she murmured. "Am I not tangible? Desirable, too? Take me, and I will be to you as no other, woman, or spirit, or ghost, fiend, devil, or angel in all the universe can ever be! Power and wisdom and rulership will I place at your command . . . love and passion undreamed hitherto——"

I had sat immovable, silent up to that point—but suddenly I made up for lost time. A violent shove sent her sprawling, squarely into the fire; and from my lips came a word so descriptive that Earth's vilest would have blushed in outraged modesty had that epithet been applied.

But the seductively lovely Princess of Hell evidently took the word as a compliment. And if she were angry at being shoved into the fire, she showed no sign thereof. Out from the flames she glided, more alluring than ever; not a hair of her dusky tresses disturbed; with never a blemish on her gold-bronze skin; and with a provocative smile on her curving lips.

"What you have called me—I would be even that, for you," she sighed languorously. "You and I were meant for each other since ever Eternity began——"

But at that, I exploded! Meant for that she-devil? *I?* My hand shot out, seizing her slender throat in a vise-like grip, mercilessly.

"You——!" The word was even worse than the first epithet I had used. "Since arrow and sword fail, let's see what choking will do!"

I tightened my clutch, putting forth all my strength. For good measure, I drove my fist into her face—and nearly dislocated my arm! For the Princess of Hell, she-fiend—ghost—woman—or whatsoever she really was, or had

been, simply wasn't there! In fact, I wondered if she'd ever been there, or had I dozed, and dreamed? . . .

"It was no dream, King Karan!"

The voice was full, sonorous, pleasant. Glancing up, I saw a tall, stately old man, barcheaded, smiling in amity.

"Zarf! Koto! Up!" I shouted, leaping to my feet, sword in hand. The old man raised his hand in protest.

"Nay, King Karan, they will sleep unless *I* release them from their slumber. That she-fiend put them into a trance from which only someone with power greater than hers can arouse them. Nor will I do so until after you and I confer on a matter of mutual benefit."

"Who are you?" I demanded. "And what devilment do you plan against me and my comrades?"

"Yon sleeper—Zarf—told you of a magician; and you set forth to seek that one, did you not? Well, I am he whom you seek, and your journey is at an end, King Karan. Knowing of your coming, I was prepared to greet you as soon as you entered my domains—and this ruined city marks my borderline. So, I am here!"

"King Karan, you are naught to me, nor I to you. But we have a common enemy—Djl Grm! Between him and me there lies an ancient feud. You he has wronged. There is a service—I get that from your mind—which you hope I can and will render you.

"Karan, King afar from your crown, throne, and kingdom, you are a bold and resourccful man, and your two companions are worth an army of ordinary folk. Render me one service, faithfully, without evasion or quibble, and I will release your locked memory! Well?"

"Arouse Zarf and Koto," I commanded. "If you be the one I seek, they will identify you, nor will they harm you. I, Karan, give you protection!"

He actually laughed at that, although there was more of admiration than derision in his laugh.

"Bold as ever, King Karan," he complimented. "As you have said, so will I do." He made a slight gesture, murmuring something I could not catch. "Now, speak, in a whisper if you will, and see if they be asleep."

As I complied, they came abruptly to their feet, fully alert . . . they took one look . . . on Koto's ugly face came such an expression of ghastly fear that I hastened to assure him he was in no danger. Zarf bowed in respect, albeit he showed no fear. Our visitor spoke, in a courteous manner;

"You know me, Zarf? You, too, Baron Koto?"

"You are Agnor Halit, the mighty magician I persuaded my King to seek," Zarf responded gravely.

Koto nodded vehemently. "My father says you have more power than the devil himself, O Agnor Halit."

"Is King Karan satisfied?"

"I am," I confirmed. "But why do you meet me here, rather than making me journey all the way to your abode?"

"For this reason—the service I ask, if I am to release your inhibited memory, will take you back on your path, even to the near shore of the Sea of the Dead. And so, I save you many long, weary days of travel, hardship and danger."

"And this service?"

"Give heed, then, and I will explain. There is a treasure I would fain possess. There be good reasons why I may not go after it myself, yet those reasons would not affect you. Truth to tell, it is hidden in the territory ruled by another magician who knows not it is there. The one who hid this treasure is another magician . . . long ago he hid the priceless thing for some dire reason of his own. It is the statue of a naked, beautiful female; yet it is an enormous jewel—a flawless sapphire, a trifle over half life-size—"

"No sapphire in all the worlds was ever that big," I objected. But Agnor Halit merely smiled as he assented:

"True! But magic works wonders, King Karan. Your throne is made of a huge chrysolite, albeit not in all the worlds was a chrysolite ever that big! Still are you 'King Karan of the Chrysolite Throne.' Magic made your throne from certain substances, yet a trader in gems would tell you it is genuine chrysolite! . . .

"This sapphire statue was made from flesh and blood by enchantment. It is the actual body of a witch who dared withstand a great magician, long ago, until he conquered her by treachery. For punishment he transmuted her to sapphire, reducing her size to that of a half-grown child, and so left her a beautiful image in which her soul is still imprisoned. But once I have that image in my possession, I will have a hold upon him. . . .

"He hated her so greatly that after turning her to crystal, he could in nowise abide to look upon her constantly; wherefore he hid her in a submerged cavern near this shore of the Sea of the Dead. But that cavern can be entered—at times."

"And if I bring to you this statue—"

"Then will I release the bonds that hold your memory in abeyance. So be it that you release the Sapphire Image to me, without any reservation or quibble—your memories of all the past will be perfect. I, Agnor Halit, magician, do pledge you this, Karan of Octolan. And my pledges I do keep to the last atom. I have wrought every known sin, and many nameless evils—but of one thing is Agnor Halit thus far guiltless—a broken promise!"

"It is well," I answered. And not to be outdone by him, a dealer in all unholiness, I gave pledge in return: "I, Karan, will deliver to you that treasure if I succeed in carrying out my venture, nor will I claim part or parcel in it. For aught I care, you may shatter it to blue slivers the moment I deliver it to you."

A demoniacal light flickered momentarily in that dark sorcerer's eyes as he said vindictively:

"I may do an even stranger thing than that, once the thing is in my possession!"

"I am not concerned with your mysteries," I shrugged. "All I need to know about you is that you and I have an agreement which we both intend to keep. Now, tell me all you can, that I may surely find that place where the Sapphire Image is hidden."

So for the rest of the night we three sat listening while that gentle-seeming old man told us in detail all he knew about our course—while at the same time he warned us frankly that we were going direct into the worst antechamber of Hell when we reached the entrance to the cavern. And, as we later found out for ourselves, he understated. . . .

"Lord Karan," Koto said, pointing—"unless Agnor Halit lied, yon place is the entrance to the cavern we seek."

We dismounted after one glance, for the marks were unmistakable. Five huge boulders indicated the angles of a pentagon; in the center, a pool, evidently filled with water from the Sea of the Dead through some underground channel. To substantiate this supposition, the surface of the pool heaved with the heaving of the surges along the beach some few hundred yards distant.

Even as we watched, the surface became violently agitated; a vortex formed, became a miniature whirlpool, making queer sucking noises, strange gurglings and whistling moans. This lasted for upward of an hour. After that, the surface became level and still.

Then abruptly came a change. In the very center a huge bubble rose and burst, polluting the atmosphere with a most unholy stench. More bubbles rose and the stench grew worse. Bubbles came continually, and the pool boiled like a cauldron, filling the air with horrible odor. Then again the surface stilled.

Now my courage well-nigh forsook me, and without shame I admit it. For I knew I'd have to dive into that loathly pool while the vortex pulled downward; and come up—if ever I did come up—while the bubbles arose! And it was in nowise a pleasing prospect. After we'd been studying the pool for some time, Zarf evidently came to the same conclusion I had reached, for he said bluntly:

"My King, that old devil, Agnor Halit laid a trap for you! It is well known that King Karan does not lightly break his word. But if I, Zarf, have aught to say about this matter, here is once Karan of Octolan breaks a pledge, nor gives it a second thought. To plunge into that pool is the act of a madman. If that damned sorcerer wants that image so badly, let him come and dive for it himself. He will only go to Hell a little sooner, through a most befitting gateway, and this region of space will be that much improved because of his absence!"

"But my memory, Zarf?"

"Once you've gone into that filthy hole, you'll have no need for it, as

you'll not come up to use it! Nay, let us rather go back to Koto's hut and plot to regain your kingdom. If successful, we can then force Djl Grm to undo his foul sorcery——"

"Not so fast, Zarf," Koto interrupted. "My father warned our King to comply with Agnor Halit's request, and said that if he did, all would go well with his plans. But my father said, too, that if our King refused, he'd regret it all his life long."

Now Zarf and I looked at each other blankly, for there was truth in what Koto had just said.

"I wonder if there is any other way to regain that statue," I suggested tentatively.

"I know a good way," Koto said simply. "It is just this: Koto goes down, and comes up with the image, or stays down there with it. And if aught goes wrong, Koto can well be spared——"

"Nay, my Koto," I said huskily, for I was deeply moved by the faithful fellow's loyal and courageous proffer—"I can ill spare——"

A gurgling noise from the pool. Koto rose abruptly, said no word and gave no sign, but dived like a frog, head first, into the center of the rapidly forming whirlpool. Neither Zarf nor I had been alert enough to prevent him, for he had moved too quickly. We stared at each other, open-mouthed in amazement.

"King Karan," Zarf's voice rang like a clarion—"when you regain your kingdom remember that brave fool, Baron Koto of the Red Wilderness, and sometimes think of—Zarf!"

*Splash!*

I stood alone, gaping stupidly at the spot where two splendid, loyal noblemen had disappeared. The vortex was growing weaker—it would cease ere long—then an eternity of waiting, hoping—perhaps they would never come up—I'd be alone—never see them again—I, a King minus crown, throne, realm, memory, wife, subjects—why! the only *subjects* I knew or cared about. . . .

I took a deep full breath, and dived.

That vile fluid that stank so abominably hurt worse than it smelt. It was actually corrosive. It *bit!* Raw potash lye is its nearest comparison. . . . I was still head down and going deeper. I was spinning with the swirling until I grew dizzy. My eyeballs felt as if burning out of their sockets from that acrid solution—down, down, and down! A faint, dimly seen blue light struck horizontally through the whirlpool—two vague, shadowy figures barely seen as I whirled in that mad headlong dance—a powerful grip clamped fast on one of my ankles and I thought I was being rent apart—the vortex hated to let go—but that mighty pull at my leg would not be denied—I looked up into Koto's ugly face—then Zarf's voice, heavy with reproach:

"King Karan, is this well? Go back, I pray you, as soon as the bubbles rise!"

But at that, I flatly refused, standing on my royal dignity; and I made them yield the point, maugre their stubborn insistence.

A tunnel stretched away into the dim distance, and up that tunnel we started—toward what? Steadily the blue light became stronger, and in my mind arose the certitude that it emanated from the Blue Image. Demon faces peered at us from cracks and crevices, but none of the devils of the place found hardihood to attack us.

The tunnel debouched into a great cavern. In the exact center, on a mound of bleached skulls stood the source of the blue radiance—the Sapphire Witch herself. I gasped in awed admiration at the flawless perfection of her beauty—and suddenly, how I did hate that sorcerer Agnor Halit, to whom I'd promised to deliver that exquisite Image of Incomparable Loveliness! Cheerfully would I have bartered the empires of the universe for its possession—did I but own those empires—nor would I have considered the price exorbitant. *I wanted it—I wanted it!* And I'd pledged—

Around that mound, in a ring on the floor of the cavern, lay many stones. Half the size of human heads they were, round as balls, and no two were of the same color. Every one was aglow, softly, with inward lights, as if each were afire deep inside—dark reds there were; dull orange; dusky blues, garish greens and sinister purples. We knew they were sentient, malignant, resenting our intrusion! Koto responded by kicking one stone that was apparently sneering at him and radiating contempt. At the impact of Koto's foot, the smoldering stone gave forth a metallic clang like a smitten gong, rose straight in the air to the level of Koto's face—then hurtled straight at him with a speed that would have cracked his skull, had not Zarf struck at the Flying Stone with his sword and deflected its course.

A dozen of them promptly left the floor and flew at Zarf—who as promptly turned and fled. But he was actuated by discretion rather than fear. I saw him race headlong into a crack in the tunnel wall—and shortly, the devil who dwelt therein came tumbling out, well-nigh sheared in two by Zarf's sword. Evidently Zarf preferred coping with devils, to the Flying Stones. Koto, having the same idea, hastily retreated to the tunnel mouth—and I went with Koto. In another moment Zarf rejoined us there, grinning sheepishly. The Flying Stones did not follow us that far from the Blue Statue. . . .

We stood disconsolate, wondering how we were to pass their formidable menace—and as if to show us how futile was our quest, of a sudden the entire ring of Flying Stones levitated to the height of a man's shoulders and head, and commenced to swirl about the Sapphire Witch who stood so serene on her altar of skulls. Truly a strange goddess, and guarded by even stranger acolytes!

Fast and faster swirled the Flying Stones, their colored lights glowing more and more brightly—faster yet, until we could no longer distinguish any single stone—they were merely a beautiful, gleaming blur of fire—gradually a humming sound became audible, swelling in volume till it be-

came a roar like the diapason of a mighty organ—soon it became distinguishable as a chant of warning! . . .

And at that, a sort of madness came upon me. I had come for that image—to bear it away—not to stand and look at it from a distance. And that image I meant to take, forthwith! In my rage, all else faded—kingdom, wife, subjects, memory, Agnor Halit, Djil Grm, Zarf, Koto, even my own welfare mattered not. I ran forward shouting:

"Fools! I am Karan of Octolan! I have come for that image! It shall be mine! Down and lie still I say!"

Now who was I, after all, that those Flying Stones should obey me? Yet so it was! The fiery band settled down instantly. I walked confidently forward, picked up the image, and so, back to where Zarf and Koto stood staring in amazed incredulity.

"Somewhat of magic my King knows, it appears!" gasped Koto shakily. I myself could hardly believe it. But the fact remained that I held the statue in my arms. And we three walked down that tunnel, nor did aught bother us all the way to the upper world!

Once at the surface, we wiped the foulness of the pool from the lovely image, and stood actually adoring the matchless treasure in the clear light . . . looked suddenly up, and saw Koto's father, and with him that utterly damned sorcerer, Djil Grm.

The sorcerer clutched swiftly for the image, but as swiftly Zarf spun his sword in a glittering wheel of defense in front of it—and the magician flinched back. Then he pointed a finger—and Zarf became temporarily paralyzed. Koto snatched up the image, and tucking it beneath his left arm, he waggled his formidable bludgeon under the sorcerer's nose with a meaning gesture.

"Try that trick on me!" he invited grimly. But the magician, for some reason, declined Koto's urgent invitation. Instead, I became aware of rapid interchange of telepathic speech between Koto's father and Djil Grm. The great Elemental turned to Koto.

"Are you my son?"

"That, you should know best," Koto responded with a grim smile. He seemed to know what was coming next.

"Then," his father commanded—"give the Blue Image to its proper owner!"

"No!" and Koto shook his head defiantly. "It is not seemly that my King should carry burdens while I, his follower, go empty-handed. I carry it for him. His it is by right of power—for he made the Flying Stones yield to him their trust, and he bore it away from the Altar of Skulls, unmolested!"

The Elemental grew black with rage. His eyes flamed crimson, and their awful glare frightened Zarf and me. Koto looked perturbed, but a faint reddish spark began flickering in his eyes, too.

"*Give that Image to Djl Grm, I said!*" The Elemental's voice held a note of awful finality.

Koto's arm flew back and swept forward again, and his bludgeon smashed full in his father's face.

"My father you are," Koto howled in fury—"but Karan is my King!"

Unharmed by the impact, the Elemental gravely handed Koto his great club. But it was to me he spoke:

"King Karan, I said I might yet be proud of Koto—I *am!*" Then to the sorcerer, sternly:

"Djl Grm, I know your power—and I know its limitations. And I know, likewise, what you have in mind. Summon your legions if you dare and I will summon mine. And what that will mean to us both ere all be ended, you know, as do I! To a certain extent, I aided you in this affair, for I wished to see how big my son had grown in the service of his King—and I am proud of his loyalty. So long as my son shall cleave to him, Karan of Octolan is my ally and friend. *Djl Grm, is it peace—or war?*"

The magician seemed like to explode with impotent fury. Suddenly he vanished with a scream of baffled, venomous rage. Then came a terrific sensation, comparable only to the emotion an arrow must feel as it leaves the string of a powerful bow.

Koto, still holding the Sapphire Image under his left arm and his great club clenched in his right fist—Zarf and I, still holding our drawn swords—and Koto's father, smiling as if pleased that he had broken openly with Djl Grm—stood looking at each other, hardly knowing what to say. But one thing we three realized—Koto's father had once again displayed his control of the forces of Nature, and we were in the city of ghosts, where I had promised to meet Agnor Halit. The Elemental said something to Koto that made him grin from ear to ear; then it vanished.

Night. And we three sat by a brightly burning campfire. Not one of us cared to sleep. We were taking no chances on some unexpected treachery assailing us at the last moment. Again and again I had tried to reach Agnor Halit mentally, bidding him come get his Blue Image and give me my price, that I might be done with a distasteful business; because I wanted that statue for myself, and also because I liked old Agnor Halit not one whit better than his fellow sorcerer, Djl Grm. And the sooner I was quit of further doings with either or both of those two, the more pleased I'd be. . . . But Agnor Halit came not. A hope dawned in my mind—perhaps he had met with some disaster. Then Koto caught my mind and spoiled that idea.

"Nay! He lives. He will come whenever it pleases him to come—till then—we—can—but—wait."

Koto sagged where he sat, slumped over on his side—and snored! Zarf, a second later, did likewise. Amazed, I shouted at them. As well shout at two solid rocks! I grew afraid at that, for I saw what was toward—they,

of their own free wills, would never have acted thus! Some malign power had wrought a sleep spell on them, and I was left to face whatever might happen. And it started immediately!

The ruined city was materializing as it was before calamity fell upon it! Stone upon stone, tier upon tier, story upon story, tower and turret and pylon, pinnacle, spire and dome, it grew in might and beauty, albeit the might suggested cruelty and the beauty was wholly evil.

The streets filled with people—men, women, and little children; and on no face did I see aught written of good, but only all wickedness. Before I could decide what to do, of a sudden a detachment of soldiery bore down on me, surrounding me before I could rise to my feet. Again I shouted to Zarf and Koto; and deep as was the slumber-spell, Koto's brain must have caught, in part, my warning. For he moved uneasily, flinging out one arm restlessly. That arm fell across the image where it lay wrapped in my cloak.

Roughly I was yanked to my feet. The soldiers disregarded the two others, for some reason. Through the streets they led me, into a splendid edifice that proved to be a temple of the loathly devil-gods I had seen depicted on the various rock-faces among the ruins.

Seated on a resplendent throne was the seductively lovely Princess of Hell, looking more alluring than when first I saw her. Languidly smiling, she addressed me as if naught but utmost amity had marked our former brief acquaintance.

"All this I have wrought for your sake, O Stranger for whom I yearn. I did it that you might have proof it is no weakling wraith who seeks your love, but one truly great, powerful, and—if you will have it so—kindly disposed toward you."

"What do you really want of me?" I demanded bluntly. "I'm not a total fool, to believe you're actually in love with me, a mere mortal nobody!"

"A mere mortal nobody?" The Princess smiled, highly amused. "Karan of Octolan, Lord of the Chrysolite Throne, is hardly a mere mortal nobody. You do yourself injustice, for you are very much a man. And not a maid in all my train but would be happy to be your mate—and myself most of all.

"Secretly, you regard me as a fiend. Well, I *am*! But I want you to know me fully. Between such as I, and your sort, exists an almost impassable barrier—unless one of your sort invites one of my order across the border. You have a different magnetism, highly beneficial to us, and we delight to bathe therein, returning in exchange a portion of our own powerful vibrations. Thus impregnated, new powers and capacities are yours for the wielding.

"We 'fiends' do not seek your souls! Most of your souls are not worth having, so weak, so embryonic are they. Not good enough to attain to celestial realms, nor wicked enough to be welcome in Hell, naught remains for most of your race but return, life after life, to some of the material planes. But within you, Karan, are great capacities for absolute Evil or absolute Good. Aye, a fit mate for even me—"

"You've said enough," I interrupted harshly. "Mate with *you*? Give you of my magnetic radiations—draw from *you* strength, power, and capacities? Why, you she-devil, sooner would I spend eternity adoring hopelessly—"

"That Blue Witch you stole," she hissed venomously. "O Fool ten thousand times accursed! You dare compare me to that icy cold crystal that can not move? I would have crowned you Lord of Hell itself in a century's time, had you accepted my offer; but since you dare to refuse me—you shall pay! . . ."

And pay I did!

In obedience to some unspoken command from the infuriated she-fiend, a particularly malignant-appearing priest stepped forward from amidst a group of his kind. I had never before seen a face so utterly unhuman. His body was more ape-like than man-like.

The priest laid one prehensile paw on my shoulder—and received a smashing blow full in the face from my fist. The priest did not even change expression, but my fist felt as if I had hit a solid rock. Holding me at arm's length, he jabbed me lightly with one finger. He knew anatomy and neurology, that devil-priest, for that light touch wrung a gasp of agony from me, and brought the cold sweat from every pore of my body, while it sent a terrific thrill like commingled ice and fire along every fiber of my nervous system. That was merely a preliminary. . . .

A vise-like grip on my temples with thumb and finger—what sort of uncanny powers did that devil-priest control? And throb after throb of lance-like twinges tore through my brain, each one a solid impact, each impact worse than the preceding one; until at each twinge bright sparks burst within my skull, rending and searing the tissues of my brain, and I, all fortitude lost, howled, moaned, shrieked and yelled like any madman in Bedlam as those awful pulsations continued into an eternity of anguish.

But that became monotonous. My howls were too much alike, and wearied the Princess. The devil-priest tried a new one. Releasing my temples, he lightly slapped me on the chest with the flat of his hand, meantime blowing his breath on my forehead. . . .

A most delightful sense of surcease from torture after anguish unbearable swept all through me, and I sighed my relief; but that devil-priest ran his thumb along my spine, once, and the terrific agony of that caress made all I had suffered previously seem but exquisite delight!

Stepping back a pace, the devil-priest levelled his arm, his stiffly extended fingers pointing straight at me, and I commenced to gyrate, at first slowly, then with ever accelerating speed; fast and faster, and faster yet, until the surroundings became a blur—and faster still, until the surroundings and the blur, too, disappeared, and naught remained but myself aspin on my own axis!

*Crash!*

The motion was instantaneously reversed, and what ghastly effect that

simple action had upon me can never be imagined or described. It had to be undergone to be understood, and what little sense I'd still managed to retain thus far left me entirely. . . .

I awoke! I was stretched out on a couch, suffused with untellable fatigue, acutely conscious of agonies endured beyond all endurance. . . .

"O my beloved! Such sufferings! But never again! In my arms, O loved man, shall you regain strength and know bliss beyond all thinking."

Hovering over me, holding me in her arms, shielding and protecting me from further harm, was a superbly beautiful woman. Azure was her hair, blue as the midsummer skies was her shimmering skin that shone with a clear luster surpassing any gem; yet in nowise was she a stone statue, but a living, breathing, loving, tender, soft-bodied woman of flesh and blood! I reached up feeble arms about her neck, drawing her down to me—almost had her lips touched mine—a lambent reddish light flickered momentarily in her wondrous blue eyes—

*"You infernal bag!"*

It was but a putrid corpse I held so lovingly within the circle of my arms—and in it the worms and maggots were acrawl! . . .

The Princess of Hell, on her gorgeous throne, gave utterance to a trill of merry laughter at the success of that final glamorous torment of the man who had dared refuse her proffered love. . . .

That laugh changed to a shriek of fury ere the last silvery note of her mirth died out! Facing her where she sat surrounded by her guards and courtiers, stood a tall, robed figure, grimly eyeing her in a silence more fraught with menace than any words could have conveyed.

*"Agnor Halit!"* she screamed in a paroxysm of terror, as she recognized the mighty sorcerer.

"Even so, O Princess of Hell, Queen over a ghostly race and a ghost city that I shattered with my magic, ages agone. And now! For that you have not felt the weight of my hand in the last few centuries, you have grown overbold. You actually dared molest this man, knowing that he was at the time engaged in serving my purpose!"

Agnor Halit drew from the breast of his robe a most peculiar reptile, more like a short, extremely thick centipede than aught else. He held it up between thumb and finger. His words came slow, heavy, laden with doom:

*"Into this vileness shalt thou go, nor ever come forth from it until I, Agnor Halit, am no more!"*

He flung the small abhorrence on the dais, before the feet of the Princess. It remained there, immovable, its full eyes fixed on her face; and she stared back in awe-stricken, horrified fascination.

The sorcerer stretched out his arms, his quivering fingers aimed at the beauteous, erotic fiend trembling in an ecstasy of fear there on her sumptuous seat. Over guards and courtiers, priests and populace an icy terror fell; they

stood staring with incredulous eyes, immovable—I myself could scarce breathe from the suspense of that tense waiting. . . .

The Princess of Hell began to shrink. Small and smaller she became, dwindling visibly before our eyes—she became as tiny as the reptile—every exquisite feature of her loveliness remained intact, in miniature—a gray mist swirled between reptile and Princess—*they became one!*

Agnor Halit snapped finger and thumb, deliberately, insultingly contemptuous. At the "*Tshuk*" he made, the entire scene vanished!

I rubbed my eyes . . . I could not believe . . . a tiny reptile, most resembling a centipede, ran before my foot and around the corner of a boulder . . . but facing me was the sorcerer I sought. . . .

"King Karan, you had a narrow escape," he assured me, earnestly. "But she is harmless now. Not even her devil-friends can enable her to work further mischief. She will be naught but a venomous worm so long as I shall continue to live—and as I may perish only by one method which none knows save me, she is like to endure for ages! Her bite might prove dangerous, but the fear I inspired in her will prevent her from trying that, even."

While talking, we had drawn to where lay Zarf and Koto. At our arrival they sat up as if waking from a natural nap. Zarf stared at the magician with undisguised hostility. Koto, most surprisingly, gave the magician a wide grin of welcome; more, he threw back my cloak and permitted Agnor Halit to see that we actually had the image he so desired. But Koto kept nigh, with a wary eye on the sorcerer's every move. Agnor Halit's eyes gleamed with a baleful light, his voice held a note of repressed, unholy exultation:

"King Karan, I am ready to fulfil my part of our pact. Once again, are you willing to renounce all claim to this Sapphire Image, yielding it to me to do with as may please my whim?"

"I am," I replied briefly. "Take the thing and give my price to me—the release of my memory. I grow weary of this magic and mystery-mongering, and would be about my own proper affairs."

"Not so fast," grinned Koto as the sorcerer turned eagerly to the statue. "King Karan has shown you his part of the bargain. Touch this image, ere you fulfil your part—which is not visible, but must be made evident to King Karan's satisfaction—and you have the father of Koto to reckon with—and, Agnor Halit, his power is greater than yours. If you doubt that—try conclusions with him! Shall I, his son, summon him?"

"King Karan," and Agnor Halit ignored Koto completely—"your word is inviolable, nor do I break promises. Yet Baron Koto is right. I can see your part—and you shall receive mine ere I take my payment. Is that satisfactory?"

"Magician," I exclaimed, impatient, "do more, and talk less! And you, Koto, let him have the thing as suits him best. I have taken his word, even as he accepts mine. Shall we quibble endlessly?"

"Yet will I do even as Baron Koto wishes," the sorcerer smiled. He laid

his left hand on the back of my neck. The forefinger of his other hand he pressed tightly against my forehead just between the eyebrows.

A slight tingling flowed from that fingertip, through my brain, to the center of the palm against my neck. A tiny spark like a distant star lit in the center of my brain. It grew and grew, filling my entire skull with a silvery-golden brilliance shot through with coruscations and sparkling, scintillant flashes. . . .

*CRASH!*

Insofar as I was aware of anything, my head had just exploded! . . . All the agonies I had ever experienced were as naught compared to that! I was so absolutely stunned I could not even fall down and die! Across immeasurable voids came a trumpet-like voice:

"King Karan, I have kept my promise!"

I blinked, and my dazed mind cleared. *Gods and Devils!* . . . In one terrific rush, I knew all! Not one trifling detail of all the long reign in Octolan as Karan of the Chrysolite Throne was lacking in my memory! And thereupon my soul descended into Hell even as I stood facing that damnable sorcerer who openly sneered in my very face, gloating over my mental anguish—for I knew one thing which wrecked all benefits I had hoped to gain by my memory's restoration. . . .

That Sapphire Image was the actual body of my wife and Queen, Mehul-Ira, transmuted by the hellish magic of that rebel sorcerer, DjI Grm, into a flawless jewel, with her pure soul imprisoned within the depths of the wondrous blue crystal—and I had renounced all claim to the image, thereby giving my royal spouse to another sorcerer quite as evil as the one I'd rescued her from! . . .

"Karan, becozened and bejaped King, I claim my price!"

"Take it—you—devil!" I managed to gasp finally, albeit my soul was dying within me, and my anguish was plainly visible to my followers. . . .

"Take the image, magician," Koto grinned.

Almost was I tempted to slay Koto for grinning like that when my very soul was suffering all the agonies of dissolution without the comfort of death's release.

Agnor Halit moved not from where he stood. Only he pointed his finger at the image. A pink mist enshrouded the statue, turned to a deep rose-red, then to scarlet, and finally became crimson like rich blood. Gradually it faded, and a living, breathing woman, radiantly lovely, arose from where she lay on the hard ground, stood erect, turned, smiling at me with an unmistakable light in her great softly shining eyes—she stretched out longing arms—Koto flung my cloak about her, concealing her exquisite perfection from the avid gaze of the sorcerer—she spoke, and the music of her voice tore my heart with its sweetness:

"Karan! My Karan! After all these dreary years! I am still all yours. . . ."

"Nay!" Agnor Halit interrupted harshly. "Karan has renounced all his claim to you! You are *mine!*"

That devilish magician, inspired by the malice common to all his ilk, had perpetrated upon me a treachery so utterly fiendish that even the demons in Hell must have shrieked and rocked in glee upon their white-hot brazen seats!

He opened his mouth to its fullest extent, and peals of gargantuan laughter bellowed forth. In a daze, I noted dimly that Koto had stooped and now held something in his hand—why! it looked like a short thick worm—or a centipede. . . .

"Agnor Halit!" Koto spoke with a sneer more bitter than aught the sorcerer knew how to use—"King Karan gave you the image, to do with as pleased your whim—but he gave not his wife! Upon her you have no claim! But I, Koto of the Red Wilderness, in her place give you—*this!*"

Flung with unerring accuracy, the tiny reptile, writhing and twisting, shot from Koto's hand, disappearing in the yawning cavity of the sorcerer's mouth.

Agnor Halit closed his mouth with a gulp of surprise. He staggered—his face turned to a ghastly greenish hue—the body that had so long defied the ravages of death dashed itself to the ground, rolling in hideous torture—convulsion after convulsion shook it—then slowly ceased—and a second later we were gazing, incredulous, at a carrion corpse that stank most outrageously and in which the worms and maggots were already at work.

"Somewhat of magic Koto knows," Koto grinned. "While my body lay still, my spirit went with my King and saw all; then, returning, I dreamed the secret Agnor Halit deemed that none knew save himself! The Princess of Hell crawled into my hand that I might use her, and so, she revenged herself! Agnor Halit is now in Hell, where she can deal with him according to her fancy!"

We mounted our great birds. My Queen sat before me, my arm steadyng her. Before us, smiling pleasantly, was Koto's father. Koto grinned at him.

"Am I your son?"

"I myself could have wrought no better," responded the great Elemental, generously.

"Your son is sorry his father has lost his once mighty power." Koto's tone was lugubrious in the extreme.

"*Lost my power?*"

"Aye! My King would rest tonight within my castle on the far edge of the Red Wilderness, my Barony—yet here we sit on these ugly, slow birds . . ."

Again the fury of the elements were loosed for my benefit. . . . We slept that night at Koto's castle!

# Jack-in-the-Box

by Ray Bradbury

*Ray Bradbury has been a breaker of traditions and the maker of new patterns for the short story. This is demonstrated once again in this quite different sort of tale, written early in his career, in that period when children and the ways of children were still uppermost in his thoughts. Perhaps this is not a fantasy in the sense that it contains nothing really supernatural. But it is a story of a child's psychology, of a viewpoint, logical in itself, but utterly out-of-this-world nonetheless.*

## J

ET US IMAGINE a Jack-in-the-box, stuffed, compressed in upon its coiled body, its head hard against a locked lid. Oh, how the springs ache to relax, to fling the Jack out of the box, bang! but no, all is tension and imprisonment. The lid stays locked thirteen years on the little trapped animal. The animal within does not know of the World, but senses it is there; not with eye, or ear, or flesh, nor by nostril, but by a sense that grew simply because the little animal has been jailed so long. Anyway, here is the boxed Jack, coiled and tightened and neurotic, head crushed to locked lid, waiting and waiting and waiting to be shot out, as from a cannon.

Edwin stood looking out the window. He could not see beyond the trees. The trees surrounded the house and the house surrounded Edwin. If he tried to find another World beyond, why the trees grew thicker in an instant, almost, to still this odd and silly notion of his.

Edwin stared out the window this way each morning.

Behind him, he heard Mother's waiting, nervous breath as she drank her breakfast coffee. She rang the emptied cup with her spoon. "Edwin, stop staring. Come eat!"

"No," he said, not knowing why.

There was a stiffened rustle. Mother turned to him as if she'd been slapped. "What do you *mean*? Breakfast's ready, isn't it? Or is the window better?"

"It's better, it's better," he said. He pressed the window with his nose,

eyes feverish for some life, *out there*. For thirteen years he had looked for life beyond the trees, seen none. He'd heard only vague noises. "It's *better*," he whispered, once again.

But finally he turned and went to eat the tasteless apricots and toast. He and Mother, alone, just like five thousand other mornings. Thirteen years of breakfasts and no movement beyond the trees and a growing curiosity.

The two of them ate silently.

She was the pale woman you saw in old houses in third floor cupola windows, each morning at nine, each afternoon at one and four, each evening at eight, and, also, if you happened to be passing at three in the morning, there she would be, in her window, silent and white, high and alone and quiet. It was like passing a deserted greenhouse in which one last wild white blossom lifted its head to the moonlight.

And her child, Edwin, was the thistle you unpoddled with a breath of your mouth in thistle-time. His hair was silken and his eyes were of a constant blue and feverish temperature. He had a haunted look. He looked as if he slept poorly. He might fly all apart like a packet of ladyfinger fire-crackers if you said the right word.

So here they were at breakfast. He with his fever in him, she with hers forever dead in her, save for occasional sparkles.

Now she began to talk, slowly at first, then very rapidly and angrily, almost spitting at him. "Why must you disobey every morning?" She cried at him. "I don't want you staring out, I don't want it, do you hear? What do you want? Do you want to see Them?" she cried, her fingers twitching. She was blazingly lovely, like an angry white flower. "Do you want to see the Beasts that run down paths and crush people like strawberries! Is *that* it?"

Yes, he thought, I'd like to see the Beasts, horrible as they are.

He said nothing.

"Do you want to go *out there*?" she asked, sharply. "Do you want to go out there like your Father did before you were born and be killed, be run down by one of those terrible Beasts on the road, is *that* what you want! Answer me!"

He looked at the floor. "No, Ma'm."

"Isn't it enough your Father died that way? Isn't it enough that They killed him? Why should you want to have anything to do with those terrible Things? How many times must I tell you?" She motioned toward the door. "Of course, if you really *want* to die—go ahead. Be killed."

She quieted at last, but her fingers kept flexing. "Your Father built this World, every part of it. It was good enough for him and it should be enough for you. There's nothing beyond those trees but death and I won't have you poking your nose out. This *is* the World, remember. There's no other worth bothering with!"

He nodded miserably.

"Don't do it again," she said. She ate for a few seconds and then looked

up. "You're forgiven. It's silly to think there could possibly be anything worth seeing beyond the trees. Smile now, and finish your toast."

He ate softly, with the window reflected where he could stare secretly at it, upon his spoon. After a long time he glanced up.

"Mom?" he asked, carefully.

"Yes?" She was wary.

"What's—?" He couldn't say it. He swallowed. "What's—dying? You talk about it all the time. Is it a—*feeling*?"

"To those who have to live on after someone else, a very *bad* feeling, yes." She stood up, warningly. "Stop chattering; you'll be late for school. Run!"

He kissed her as he ran by with his books. "Bye!"

"Say hello to Teacher for me!" she cried after him.

He fled from her like a bullet from a gun. Up endless staircases. Along passages and through halls, past windows that cascaded down dark gallery walls like waterfalls. Up and up through the layer cake of the World, with the thick frosting of Oriental rugs between and the bright candles on top.

From one high staircase he looked down through four intervals of World.

The Lowlands of kitchen, dining room, living room. The two Middle Lands of music, play, pictures, and locked, forbidden rooms. And then, *here*—he turned and stared about—the Highlands of adventure, picnic, school. Here he roamed, skipped, sang lonely child songs on the long brisk journey to his Teacher.

This was the World, Father (or God, as Mother often called him) had raised its mountains of wall-papered plaster long ago. There were foothills of stairs, forested with banisters. This was Father-God's World; in which star firmaments shone at the flick of a wall switch. And the sun was Mother, and Mother was the sun, the center about which all the World steadfastly revolved. And Edwin, like a small dark meteor, tore through all the carpeted and tapestried spaces of the World. You saw him coming and going on vast staircases, on hikes and explorations.

This *was* the World, enchanted square countries between boundaries of nailed lath and polished wood. Unknown lands and wild lands and some lands hidden.

Sometimes he and Mom picnicked in the Highlands, spread snow linens on red-tufted Persian scrolled lawns, upon the crimson carpeting of a meadow in a top plateau of the house were ancient portraits of dissatisfied peoples looked dimly down upon their eating and their revels. They drew water from silver taps in hidden tiled niches, and crashed the tumblers against the wall in dual demonstration. They played Hide and Seek and she found him rolled like a mummy in a window curtain on the fourth level. Once he got lost and wandered for hours in insane countries of dust and sheeted furniture and echoes. But she found him at last and took him back down through the layers and stratas of countries, to the familiar

Parlor land where each dust particle was exact and familiar as a snow flake.  
He ran up a stair.

There were doors to knock on, a thousand thousand doors, most of them locked and forbidden. There were bottom-tempting banisters to slide on. And there were Picasso ladies and Dali gentlemen who screamed silently at him from their canvas asylums, their golden eyes fierce, when he dawdled.

"These sorts of Things live *out there*," his mother told him one day, pointing to the Dali-Picasso people in their frames.

He stuck his tongue at them now, and ran quickly past.

He stopped running.

One of the forbidden doors stood open.

Sunlight slanted through it and warmed and excited him.

He put out his hand to the knob, and stood twisting it. He looked in. Beyond the door, a spiral staircase screwed around and up into sun and silence. His eyes darted up like birds, flying and twining on the circular stair into forbidden, sun-mellowed heights.

He flung his books down without even thinking and ran in and climbed the stairs up and around and up around until his knees ached and his breath fountained in and out, and his head banged like a bell with the effort, and at last he reached the terrible summit of the climb and stood in a sun-drenched tower to look out upon a *new* World!

"It's there!" he gasped, running from window to window in exultant discovery. "It's there!"

He was above the sombre tree barrier. For the first time in thirteen enclosed years he was high over the windy chestnuts and elms and as far as his eye could stretch he saw green and green grass and green trees and white ribbons on which beetles ran, and the other half of the world was blue and endless, with a sun in it like a navel, like an incredible deep blue room. It was so vast he felt as if he were falling, and screamed, and held onto the tower ledge, and beyond the trees, beyond the white ribbons where the beetles ran he saw things like fingers sticking up, but he didn't see any Picasso-Dali creatures, but he did see little red-white-and-blue handkerchiefs blowing in a slow wind on high white poles.

He was going to be sick. Great whitenesses moved across the eternal blue room over him and birds flew like bullets, shrilling.

Turning, he almost fell flat down the stairs.

Slamming the forbidden door at the bottom he heard the lock snap tight. He fell against the door.

"You'll go blind," he told himself, hysterically, hands to eyes. "You shouldn't have seen. You'll go blind!"

In the hall, gasping, staring, he waited for the blindness.

A minute later he stared from an ordinary Highlands window, and saw only his *own* familiar World. The high wall of elms, chestnuts and hickories, the stone fence in the vast garden below. He had always taken the forest

to be a wall beyond which was nothing but terror, nothingness, and Beings. Now he knew his World didn't end with the wall. There was more to the World than the Continent of Kitchen, the Parlor Archipelago, the Peninsula of Learning, the Music Hall (he could hear mother brightly speaking each of these clever names for places!).

He tried the locked door again.

Had he really gone up? Or was it a dream? Had he seen that half green, half blue vastness?

What if God had seen him now? Edwin trembled at the thought. God, who'd built this house, timber on timber. God, who had smoked a mysterious black pipe and had a shiny magic cane to walk with. God, who had made Edwin and the World, and who might be watching, even now.

He looked around. "I can still see," he told himself, thankfully. "I can still *see*."

Nine thirty, a good half hour late, he rapped at the School.

The door swung open.

"Good morning, Teacher."

Teacher Granleigh stood inside.

"You're late, Edwin."

"I'm sorry."

Teacher was unchanged. She wore the tall grey thick-clothed monk's robe, the cowl up over her head. She wore the silver spectacles and the grey gloves. "Come in," she said.

Beyond her the land of books burned in colors from the hearth. There were walls bricked with books, and a hearth wide enough to stand in without bumping your head, and a blazing log for heat.

The door closed behind the aching boy.

God had been here. Once He had sat at that desk, there. Once He'd walked this floor, touched these books. God had stuffed that pipe with tobacco bits and puffed it. God had stood looking out that window. This was God's room, and it smelled of Him; rubbed wood, tobacco leather and silver spurs.

Edwin's face became a pale and peaceful thing.

Here, his heart slowed. Here, he relaxed. Teacher's voice sang like a little harp, telling of God, the old days, and the World when it had shaken with God's determination and trembled at his wit. Teacher told of the days when the World skeleton was freshly blueprinted by His fingers, a pencil slash here, a loud, decisive word there, an argument, and, finally, timber rising, nail, plaster, paper and crystal. God's fingerprints still lay on little pencils under glass. Teacher never touched them. The fingerprints must be left intact! she said.

Here, in the Highlands, Edwin learned what was expected of him and his body. He was to grow into a Presence. He was to fit the odors of God and the voice of God, he was one day to stand tall and dark and very malignantly pale by that window and make the house boom with his shout.

He was to be God, himself, and nothing was to stop this. Not the sky or the trees or the Things beyond the trees.

Teacher moved like a vapour in the room.

"Why were you late, Edwin?"

"I don't know."

"I'll ask you again," she said. "Why were you late?"

"Because." He looked at the floor so as not to see her. "I found a door. It was open. One of the forbidden ones."

"A door!" Teacher Granleigh sank into a large carved chair, concerned, her glasses flashing lights off them.

Her eyes had suddenly grown intense, as if she didn't understand, or was afraid to understand.

Edwin felt drops of sweat collecting in the hollows of his eyes. "Yes. I went in!" he said, swiftly, to get the pain over.

"I won't hurt you," she said. "I won't hurt you," she insisted. "Just tell me which door, where, it must be locked."

They had always been friends. Was the friendship over? Had he spoiled things? He felt like crying.

"The door by the Dali-Picasso people. There was sunlight and steps and I climbed up, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he said in deep misery. "Don't tell Mother, please, please!"

She sat lost in her chair, her face vanishing deep back into the hollow of her grey cowl, the glasses making only a faint glitter. "And what did you see?" she asked.

"A big blue room."

"Did you?"

"And a green one. And ribbons!" He tried to make it sound unimportant to himself, but there was no stopping the eagerness and wonder behind the words.

"Ribbons?"

"Ribbons with bugs running on them. Like those little ladybugs that crawl on my hand."

"And bugs running on the ribbons," she repeated it, as if that was the last straw.

It made him sad, her voice. She sounded as if she'd lost a precious something. He wanted to make her happy.

"But I didn't stay long," he said, eagerly. "I came right down and slammed the door and locked it myself and won't go up again!"

"You won't?" Her lips, faintly moved in the shadowed cowl, were doubtful.

"No'm."

"But now you've seen," she said wearily, "and you'll want to see more."

"Ma'm?"

She shook her head. Then she leaned forward and asked a question to

which she wanted a negative answer, he could tell by her tone: "And—did you *like* what you saw?"

"Ma'm?"

"The blue room, the blue room, child, did you like it?"

"I don't know." He fidgeted, trying not to think. Then he thought of a solution, a way out. "I was scared."

She relaxed visibly. "Were you?"

"Yes'm. It was *big*!"

"It is big, Edwin, too big, uncomfortable, not like *this* world, and it's very uncertain, Edwin, remember."

"Yes'm," he said, wistfully.

"But why did you climb the stairs when you knew they were behind a forbidden door?"

He knew the answer, but hid it, trembling. "I don't know."

"There *must* be a reason."

The fire bloomed and withered and bloomed on the hearth and she waited ten long seconds. And finally he went to the little hiding place in his mind and took out the reason and without looking at teacher said, very low, "Mom."

"Your mother? She makes you—unhappy?"

"I don't know, oh, I don't know," he wailed. It was going to be good to cry, to tell someone, to get it over with and rest. "She—she," he gasped, and drew his knees tight to his bosom, misery embraced. "She's all funny, all funny."

"Nervous?"

"Yes, yes."

"Touchy, unbearable, tight, tense, is that it?"

The words were correct buttons, pushed. He let go.

"Yes!" It was a sin to admit such things of mother and he wailed and covered his face, got his hands all wet and sticky, biting and crying on them. But he wasn't saying the words, now, she said them, and all he had to do was agree between sobs. "Yes, yes, oh, yes!"

"She runs about, funny, does she? And snaps at you and holds onto you, too tight? And sometimes—you want to be alone?"

Yes, to all of them! It was very sad, he loved his mother dearly!

"That's what makes you want to run away by yourself? because she demands all your thoughts and every thing you do?"

Teacher was a million years old. "We learn," she said to herself, wearily. Rousing fitfully from her chair she walked with a slow swaying, grey robes awhisper, to a pen and paper on the desk and wrote words out. "We learn, Oh God, but slowly, and with much pain. We think we do things right, and all the time we're killing the plan." She looked up at him swiftly. He was caught with wet-rimmed, curious eyes.

"You're growing up?" she said, not as a question, but as a heavy statement of circumstance. She finished the note. "Take this to your mother. It

tells her to let you have two full hours to yourself every afternoon, to prowl where you wish. Except—out *there*." She stopped. "Are you listening to me, child?"

He wiped away the tears. "Teacher. Did Mom lie to me? I mean about out there, and the Things?"

"Look at me," she said. He looked. She moved her cowl ever so little. "I've been your friend, and never beaten you, as your mother sometimes has had to. Both of us are here to help you understand. We don't want you destroyed as God was destroyed."

Color from the hearth washed her face.

Edwin gasped.

She looked familiar. The lines were erased by the firelight and she was revealed.

She looked like his mother!

His heart leaped against his ribs.

She noticed him. "What were you going to say?"

"The fire," he looked at the fire and back at her face and the cowl jerked away from his gaze, the face vanished in blackness. "You look like Mom. I guess I'm funny."

She walked swiftly to the books on the shelves, took one down. "You know women look alike," she said, fumbling with it. "Forget it." She breathed harshly. "Here." She brought him a book. "Read from the first chapter of the Diary."

Edwin read. The fire rumbled and sucked itself brilliantly up the flue, the grey cowl settled and nodded and quieted, the face in it like a clapper in a solemn bell. The firelight ignited the little animal lettering on the shelved books. Those books from which pages had been razored and torn and censored, from which certain lines had been inked or erased, from which all pictures had been ripped, some books glued shut, or locked in bronze straps, because Edwin might see, read, understand. He read from the Diary:

"In the Beginning there was God. Who created the World with all its corridors and rooms and lands. With His hands he formed for his pleasure his loving wife and much later the child Edwin who was to be a God himself, after a number of years. . . ."

Teacher nodded and Edwin read on.

Down the banisters, breathless, he slid into the Parlor.

"Mom!"

She lay in a plump maroon chair, very like bone china. She was breathing hard as if she'd been running, and perspiring.

"Mom, you're wet!"

"Oh, hello," she said, looking at him as if it was his fault she had been running and was wet. "Nothing, nothing." Then she took him and kissed his cheeks. "Forgive me, darling. I'm a weasel. I have a great surprise for you. Your birthday is coming!"

"So soon? But it's only been ten months."

"Tomorrow it is, anyway. Do us wonders. I *say* so. Anything I *say* is true, my dear."

"And we open another room?" Dazed.

"The fourteenth room! Fifteenth room next year, and so on to your twenty-first birthday when we'll open the most important room and you'll be man of the House, God, Father, Head of the World!"

"Whee!" He tossed his books.

They laughed. It echoed and shook crystals in all the continents.

Edwin lay on his moonlit bed. Beyond his open window was the World's edge. Beyond was the blue world and the green where the Wicked Killers lived.

Tomorrow, his birthday. Why? Was he a good boy? No. Why, then? Because things were—nervous. Yes. That was it. Because they needed his birthday to cheer and calm them.

He sensed that the birthdays would come swifter, sooner from now on. The house was knotting up. Things were tight, like fists. Mom laughed too high and too much and there was a wild light in her eyes.

Would Teacher be invited? No! Mom and she'd never met. "Why not, Mom?" "Because," said Mom, "Don't you want to meet Mom, Teacher?" "Some day," said Teacher.

Where'd teacher go nights? To one of the secret rooms? Out into *there*. He looked at the wall of trees. Hardly.

His eyes closed.

Last year, when things had got nervous, Mom had advanced his birthday then, too.

Some night, he dreamed, I'll go to the Highlands and see if Teacher's really there *all* the time.

Think of something else. God. God building this Land. Think of the hour of His death when the metal thing on the concrete road crushed and killed Him because it was jealous of Him.

Oh, how the World must have *rocked* with His passing

One day, I'll be God, Mom says so.

He slept.

In the morning, bright voices below. In and out doors they moved. Edwin listened against the door that was bolted from outside; it was always bolted on festive days until the voices stopped below. Edwin scowled. *Whose* voices? They must be God's workers. They couldn't be Dali People from out there! Mom hated them with perfumed fury. Silence.

"Happy Birthday!"

Mom danced him about the party table. Cakes and ices and strawberries and hams and beefs and pink drinks in tall glasses and his name on a snowy white cake and his age in red numbers. He was stunned.

"Where'd it come from?"

"Where all food comes from," sang Mom, cryptically, swirling her green party gown. She plinked the piano in the music room and sang him Happy Birthday to You, Happy Birthday, Dear Edwin, Happy Birthday to—

Wild fanatical joy. Down with the drinks and on with the dance. She was afraid to stop.

With a silver key she unlocked the fourteenth, forbidden door. Hold your breath!

The door slid into the wall.

Disappointment. This fourteenth birthday room was hardly worth looking at. On his sixth birthday it had been the school in the Highlands. Seventh birthday? The playroom in the Lowlands. Eighth? The music room. Ninth: the kitchen all glittery chrome. Tenth birthday—the phonograph room where angels sang from moving discs. Eleventh: the garden room, a grass plot with a carpet that really *grew*, and had to be cut instead of swept. Twelfth and thirteenth birthdays, the wonders of Mom's cosmetic room and a new room for himself. Now, keenly disappointed, he looked into the fourteenth room. A dim brown closet. They stepped in.

Mom laughed. "You don't know how magic it is. Shut the door."

Hastily she poked red buttons on one wall.

"Mother!" he screamed.

The wall slid down. The room moved.

She soothed him. "Hush, darling."

Horrified, he watched the wall sink down into the floor, taking the door with it. Another door appeared and then another. The room stopped. Mother pointed at the strange new door. "Open it."

He opened it and stood paralyzed.

"Where's the parlor? How'd we get here? This is the Highlands!"

"We flew! From now on, once a week, you'll fly to school instead of taking the long way round."

"Oh, Mother, Mother!"

They idled deliciously in the sweet grass of the garden, sipping wide saucers of apple cider, their elbows on crimson silk cushions, their feet, with the shoes kicked off, wriggling in the tickly dandelions. Mom jumped three times when she heard a Monster roaring beyond the trees. One of those Monsters that had run down and killed God. "I'll protect you," said Edwin. "Thank you," she said, with polite uneasiness.

Beyond the trees, Chaos waited. Metal beasts shouted mating calls. Mom shivered, convulsed her sequin shawl with her fingers. Once, they sighted a chromium bird thing flying through the blue rift in the trees, humming.

From the garden, a double path ran into oblivion, between trees. Down it, mother whispered tensely over her cider, the beasts snuffled at night, waiting to mash Edwin.

"See?" she pointed. "Their droppings."

He saw the oily pools like molasses between the double tracks.

Crackle, crackle, crackle. The birthday ended like cellophane burnt to nothing.

At sunset in the Parlor security, mother inhaled champagne with her tiny, seedling nostrils and her little eye of a mouth. She hiccupped with a soft flourish of her breasts. Drowsy wild, she herded the cider-sober Edwin to his room, and a moment later on her way downstairs dropped a champagne bottle two flights.

He undressed in wonder. This year. Next. And which room two years, three years from now? The beasts. Being mashed. God. Killed. What was killed? What was death? Was death a feeling? Did God enjoy it? Was death a journey?

Below, another champagne bottle shattered.

Morning was a cool smell in the room. Downstairs, food was probably manifesting in a finger-snap on the table.

Edwin washed and dressed. He outlined the day in his mind. Breakfast, school, lunch, an hour in the music room at the piano, phonograph for an hour, then perhaps an hour or two with the electrical games that shot back at him and Mom, then tea in the Outlands. Then— He remembered the note. He picked it up. He'd forgotten to give it to Mom. He'd give it to her now. She'd have to let him run around the World by himself from tea-time until supper. Then, this evening, he might go up to School again where he and Teacher prowled the censored library together and he'd puzzle which words and thoughts about that world out there had been censored from his eyes.

He opened the door. There was an unusual silence in the World. He expected to find Mom gay, happy, relaxed, waiting for him. The hall was empty.

Down through the dells of the World a vapour hung like a light, unmoving veil. There was a silence which no footstep broke; the hills were quiet, the silver founts did not pulse in the first sunlight, and the balustrade lifted its sinuous neck up up the stairs like some prehistoric monster, to peer into his room. . . .

He walked downstairs to the parlor.

From the parlor, he walked to the dining room.

"Good morning, Mother."

Mother slept in her shining green dress on the floor, a glass still clasped in one hand. The hearth was littered with glass bits, nearby.

"Mother?"

Her face was pale, relaxed, and she enjoyed some dream.

Not wanting to disturb her he sat at the table and was shocked to find it empty. All his life there'd been food on it, but not this morning. He looked blankly at it.

Earlier, he'd heard a beast baying outside the kitchen door. Insistently. Why?

He went to Mother.

"Mother, wake up, wake up."

She paid no attention. She'd had spells before of stubbornness, but now she would not move.

"Shall I go to school? I'm hungry."

He sat on the chair for half an hour waiting for the food to appear like magic. It didn't.

"Well," he said, finally. "You just sleep, mother. I'm going up to school."

The Highlands were gloomy and shadowed. The white glass suns that shone in the ceilings no longer glowed. It was a day of sullen fog in the World, up the dark corridors, on the soft, silent stairs, through dim, dusty rooms Edwin wandered, a sense of overwhelming wrongness seizing on him. Things were changing.

He tapped and tapped again at the School door. The door drifted in, whining, of its own accord.

The school was dark. The hearth stones were cold; no fire hid in its cavern to throw shadows on the high ceiling. The blinds were drawn at the windows. The books sat upon the shelves. There was not a sound.

"Teacher?"

He drew the blinds.

"Teacher Granleigh?"

Everything was flat and empty. A faint colony of dust particles trickled down a melancholy shaft of sunlight that fell upon the floor.

Edwin put out his hands as if to normalize things. He wanted the fire to crack open like a popcorn kernel, blooming to life. He shut his eyes to give Teacher time to appear. He opened them and was stupefied at what he saw on the desk.

Neatly folded was the grey cowl and the grey robe, atop which gleamed the silver spectacles, and one grey glove. He touched them. One grey glove was gone. There were also two pieces of some greasy chalk that made a mark on the back of his hand when he used it.

He drew back, staring at Teacher's empty robe, the glasses, the greasy chalk. His hand fell upon a doorknob in a door which had always been locked, on the far side of the room. The door swung open, revealing another of those small, moving rooms.

"Teacher?" He walked into it. The door slid shut.

Pressing a button made it move and with it moved a slow awful coldness, of fear, of silence, of the World grown so very quiet. Teacher gone, and mother—sleeping. Down sank the room, purring like a cat, then it clashed

some machinery, and another door opened before him as he pushed the door. He stepped out.

The dining room!

Behind him was not a door, but a tall, six foot book-case from which he'd emerged. Edwin blinked rapidly.

And Mother lay sleeping, untouched, uncaring, upon the floor. And folded under her, barely showing, he noticed for the first time, was one of Teacher's soft grey gloves.

He stood over her, staring down at the grey glove.

After awhile he began to whimper.

The table was bare. He shouted for it to fill with food. It did not. He called to Mother. She didn't move. He ran back up to the Highlands again and the hearth was still cold, Teacher's robe still lay folded and empty, and one grey glove was missing. He waited. Teacher didn't come. He ran back down the Lowlands, crying now. He sat by Mother and talked with her and felt the grey glove. The afternoon came and he was hungry.

The idea of hunger and loneliness engulfed him.

Teacher must be out in the Outlands somewhere, now. If he found her, he'd bring her back to wake mother so everything would be fine!

Through the kitchen, out back, he found late afternoon light and the beasts hooting beyond the rim of the World. He clung to the garden wall, not daring to let go, and then when nothing threatened, and sunlight warmed him as the hearth fire often had, he felt better. He heard the wind blow softly in the trees. He walked on the path. His feet slipped on the beast droppings and he stared far down the tunnel between the trees. Did he dare go beyond, out there?

"Teacher?"

He walked along the beast spoor a few yards.

"Teacher!"

Over his shoulder lay his World and its very new silence. From a distance he heard noises, sounds, beyond the trees. His mouth widened and his eyes squinted fiercely. He walked some more, pausing, then going on. Behind, he was startled to see his World diminish. How small! Why? It had always been so large! He called again and again, and everything was new. Smells filled his nose, colors and shapes and sizes filled his eyes.

If I go beyond the trees I'll die, he thought. Mom said so. What's dying? What is it anyway, what's it like? Is it another room? A blue one? A green one? There's a big green one, ahead. Oh, Mother, Teacher.

His feet hurried, increased their pace, knowing not why. The legs that carried him were no longer his own; his voice, his yelling, belonged to something new. The path rushed under him, the Universe behind dwindled and vanished. He began to laugh. . . .

The policeman scratched his head and looked at the pedestrian.

"These kids. Honest to God, I can't figure them."

"How's that?" asked the pedestrian.

The policeman thought it over. "A second ago a little boy ran by. He laughed and cried all at the same time. He jumped up and down and *touched* things. Things like bushes and trees and little pieces of paper, and fire hydrants and dogs, and people. Things like sidewalks and gates and parked cars. Why, Christ, he even touched *me* to see if *I* was here, and he looked at the sky, all running tears, and he kept yelling something funny."

"What did he yell?" asked the pedestrian.

"He kept yelling, 'I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm glad I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead, it's *good* to be dead, I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm *glad* I'm dead!' One of them new kid's games, I guess."

# *The Noticeable Conduct of Professor Chadd*

*by G. K. Chesterton*

You have undoubtedly enjoyed many of G. K. Chesterton's clever and sparkling stories. As a writer of short mysteries with paradoxical angles and vivid characters, he is almost unbeatable. But did Chesterton write any science-fiction short stories? Novels in that vein such as *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* are known, but locating a short story, typically Chesterton and clearly science-fiction, was a rare discovery. We turned up the one that follows in a little known volume of his, *The Club of Queer Trades*, published in 1905, and not reprinted since as far as we know. Professor Chadd is a scientific discoverer, but how and why make an unusual story even for science-fiction.

BASIL GRANT had comparatively few friends besides myself; yet he was the reverse of an unsociable man. He would talk to any one anywhere, and talk not only well but with perfectly genuine concern and enthusiasm for that person's affairs. He went through the world, as it were, as if he were always on top of an omnibus or waiting for a train. Most of these chance acquaintances, of course, vanished into darkness out of his life. A few here and there got hooked on to him, so to speak, and became his lifelong intimates, but there was an accidental look about all of them as if they were windfalls, samples taken at random, goods fallen from a goods-train or presents fished out of a bran-pie. One would be, let us say, a veterinary surgeon with the appearance of a jockey; another a mild prebendary with a white beard and vague views; another a young captain in the Lancers, seemingly exactly like other captains in the Lancers; another a small dentist from Fulham, in all reasonable certainty precisely like every other dentist from Fulham. Major Brown, small, dry, and dapper, was one of these; Basil had made his acquaintance over a discussion in a hotel cloak-room about the right hat, a discussion which reduced the little major almost to a kind of masculine hysterics, the compound of the selfishness of an old bachelor and the scrupulosity of an old maid. They had gone home in a cab together and then dined with each other twice a week until they died. I

myself was another. I had met Grant while he was still a judge, on the balcony of the National Liberal Club, and exchanged a few words about the weather. Then we had talked for about half an hour about politics and God; for men always talk about the most important things to total strangers. It is because in the total stranger we perceive man himself; the image of God is not disguised by resemblances to an uncle or doubts of the wisdom of a mustache.

One of the most interesting of Basil's motley group of acquaintances was Professor Chadd. He was known to the ethnological world (which is a very interesting world, but a long way off this one) as the second greatest, if not the greatest, authority on the relations of savages to language. He was known to the neighborhood of Hart Street, Bloomsbury, as a bearded man with a bald head, spectacles, and a patient face, the face of an unaccountable Nonconformist who had forgotten how to be angry. He went to and fro between the British Museum and a selection of blameless tea-shops, with an armful of books and a poor but honest umbrella. He was never seen without the books and the umbrella, and was supposed (by the lighter wits of the Persian MS. room) to go to bed with them in his little brick villa in the neighborhood of Shepherd's Bush. There he lived with three sisters, ladies of solid goodness but sinister demeanor. His life was happy, as are almost all the lives of methodical students, but one would not have called it exhilarating. His only hours of exhilaration occurred when his friend, Basil Grant, came into the house, late at night, a tornado of conversation.

Basil, though close on sixty, had moods of boisterous babyishness, and these seemed for some reason or other to descend upon him, particularly in the house of his studious and almost dingy friend. I can remember vividly (for I was acquainted with both parties and often dined with them) the gayety of Grant on that particular evening when the strange calamity fell upon the professor. Professor Chadd was, like most of his particular class and type (the class that is at once academic and middle-class), a Radical of a solemn and old-fashioned type. Grant was a Radical himself, but he was that more discriminating and not uncommon type of Radical who passes most of his time in abusing the Radical party. Chadd had just contributed to a magazine an article called "Zulu Interests and the New Makango Frontier," in which a precise scientific report of his study of the customs of the people of T'Chaka was reinforced by a severe protest against certain interference with these customs both by the British and the Germans. He was sitting with the magazine in front of him, the lamplight shining on his spectacles, a wrinkle in his forehead, not of anger, but of perplexity, as Basil Grant strode up and down the room, shaking it with his voice, with his high spirits and his heavy tread.

"It's not your opinions that I object to, my esteemed Chadd," he was saying, "it's you. You are quite right to champion the Zulus, but for all that you do not sympathize with them. No doubt you know the Zulu way of cooking tomatoes and the Zulu prayer before blowing one's nose; but for

all that you don't understand them as well as I do, who don't know an assegai from an alligator. You are more learned, Chadd, but I am more Zulu. Why is it that the jolly old barbarians of this earth are always championed by people who are their antithesis? Why is it? You are sagacious, you are benevolent, you are well informed, but, Chadd, you are not savage. Live no longer under that rosy illusion. Look in the glass. Ask your sisters. Consult the librarian of the British Museum. Look at this umbrella." And he held up that sad but still respectable article. "Look at it. For ten mortal years to my certain knowledge you have carried that object under your arm, and I have no sort of doubt that you carried it at the age of eight months, and it never occurred to you to give one wild yell and hurl it like a javelin—thus—"

And he sent the umbrella whizzing past the professor's bald head, so that it knocked over a pile of books with a crash and left a vase rocking.

Professor Chadd appeared totally unmoved, with his face still lifted to the lamp and the wrinkle cut in his forehead.

"Your mental processes," he said, "always go a little too fast. And they are stated without method. There is no kind of inconsistency"—and no words can convey the time he took to get to the end of the word—"between valuing the right of the aborigines to adhere to their stage in the evolutionary process so long as they find it congenial and requisite to do so. There is, I say no inconsistency between this concession which I have just described to you and the view that the evolutionary stage in question is, nevertheless, so far as we can form any estimate of values in the variety of cosmic processes, definable in some degree as an inferior evolutionary stage."

Nothing but his lips had moved as he spoke, and his glasses still shone like two pallid moons.

Grant was shaking with laughter as he watched him.

"True," he said, "there is no inconsistency, my son of the red spear. But there is a great deal of incompatibility of temper. I am very far from being certain that the Zulu is on an inferior evolutionary stage, whatever the blazes that may mean. I do not think there is anything stupid or ignorant about howling at the moon or being afraid of devils in the dark. It seems to me perfectly philosophical. Why should a man be thought a sort of idiot because he feels the mystery and peril of existence itself? Suppose, my dear Chadd, suppose it is we who are the idiots because we are not afraid of devils in the dark?"

Professor Chadd slit open a page of the magazine with a bone paper-knife and the intent reverence of the bibliophile.

"Beyond all question," he said, "it is a tenable hypothesis. I allude to the hypothesis which I understand you to entertain, that our civilization is not or may not be an advance upon, and indeed (if I apprehend you) is, or may be a retrogression from states identical with or analogous to the state of the Zulus. Moreover, I shall be inclined to concede that such a proposition is of the nature, in some degree at least, of a primary proposition, and

cannot adequately be argued, in the same sense, I mean, that the primary proposition of pessimism, or the primary proposition of the non-existence of matter cannot adequately be argued. But I do not conceive you to be under the impression that you have demonstrated anything more concerning this proposition than that it is tenable, which, after all, amounts to little more than the statement that it is not a contradiction in terms."

Basil threw a book at his head and took out a cigar.

"You don't understand," he said, "but, on the other hand, as a compensation, you don't mind smoking. Why you don't object to that disgustingly barbaric rite I can't think. I can only say that I began it when I began to be a Zulu, about the age of ten. What I maintained was that although you knew more about Zulus in the sense that you are a scientist, I know more about them in the sense that I am a savage. For instance, your theory of the origin of language, something about its having come from the formulated secret language of some individual creature, though you knocked me silly with facts and scholarship in its favor, still does not convince me, because I have a feeling that that is not the way that things happen. If you ask me why I think so, I can only answer that I am a Zulu; and if you ask me (as you most certainly will) what is my definition of a Zulu, I can answer that also. He is one who has climbed a Sussex apple-tree at seven and been afraid of a ghost in an English lane."

"Your process of thought—" began the immovable Chadd, but his speech was interrupted. His sister, with that masculinity which always in such families concentrates in sisters, flung open the door with a rigid arm and said:

"James, Mr. Bingham, of the British Museum, wants to see you again."

The philosopher rose with a dazed look, which always indicates in such men the fact that they regard philosophy as a familiar thing, but practical life as a weird and unnerving vision, and walked dubiously out of the room.

"I hope you do not mind my being aware of it, Miss Chadd," said Basil Grant, "but I hear that the British Museum has recognized one of the men who have deserved well of their commonwealth. It is true, is it not, that Professor Chadd is likely to be made keeper of Asiatic manuscripts?"

The grim face of the spinster betrayed a great deal of pleasure and a great deal of pathos also. "I believe it's true," she said. "If it is, it will not only be great glory which women, I assure you, feel a great deal, but great relief, which they feel more—relief from worry from a lot of things. James's health has never been good, and while we are as poor as we are, he had to do journalism and coaching, in addition to his own dreadful grinding notions and discoveries, which he loves more than man, woman, or child. I have often been afraid that unless something of this kind occurred we should really have to be careful of his brain. But I believe it is practically settled."

"I am delighted," began Basil, but with a worried face, "but these red-tape negotiations are so terribly chancy that I really can't advise you to build

on hope, only to be hurled down into bitterness. I've known men, and good men like your brother, come nearer than this and be disappointed. Of course, if it is true—"

"If it is true," said the woman, fiercely, "it means that people who have never lived may make an attempt at living."

Even as she spoke the professor came into the room, still with the mazed look in his eyes.

"Is it true?" asked Basil, with burning eyes.

"Not a bit true," answered Chadd, after a moment's bewilderment. "Your argument was in three points fallacious."

"What do you mean?" demanded Grant.

"Well," said the professor, slowly, "in saying that you could possess a knowledge of the essence of Zulu life distinct from—"

"Oh, confound Zulu life!" cried Grant, with a burst of laughter. "I mean, have you got the post?"

"You mean the post of keeper of the Asiatic manuscripts," he said, opening his eye with childlike wonder. "Oh yes, I got that. But the real objection to your argument, which has only, I admit, occurred to me since I have been out of the room, is that it does not merely presuppose a Zulu truth apart from the facts, but infers that the discovery of it is absolutely impeded by the facts."

"I am crushed," said Basil, and sat down to laugh, while the professor's sister retired to her room, possibly to laugh, possibly not.

It was extremely late when we left the Chadds', and it is an extremely long and tiresome journey from Shepherd's Bush to Lambeth. This may be our excuse for the fact that we (for I was stopping the night with Grant) got down to breakfast next day at a time inexpressibly criminal, a time, in point of fact, close upon noon. Even to that belated meal we came in a very lounging and leisurely fashion. Grant, in particular, seemed so dreamy at table that he scarcely saw the pile of letters by his plate, and I doubt if he would have opened any of them if there had not lain on the top that one thing which has succeeded amid modern carelessness in being really urgent and coercive—a telegram. This he opened with the same heavy distraction with which he broke his egg and drank his tea. When he read it he did not stir a hair or say a word, but something, I know not what, made me feel that the motionless figure had been pulled together suddenly as strings are tightened on a slack guitar. Though he said nothing and did not move, I knew that he had been for an instant cleared and sharpened with a shock of cold water. It was scarcely any surprise to me when the man who had drifted sullenly to his seat and fallen into it, kicked it away like a cur from under him and came round to me in two strides.

"What do you make of that?" he said, and flattened out the wire in front of me.

It ran: "Please come at once. James's mental state dangerous. Chadd."

"What does the woman mean?" I said, after a pause, irritably. "Those women have been saying that the poor old professor was mad ever since he was born."

"You are mistaken," said Grant, composedly. "It is true that all sensible women think all studious men mad. It is true, for the matter of that, all women of any kind think all men of any kind mad. But they don't put it in telegrams, any more than they wire to you that the grass is green or God all-merciful. These things are truisms, and often private ones at that. If Miss Chadd has written down under the eye of a strange woman in a post office that her brother is off his head, you may be perfectly certain that she did it because it was a matter of life and death, and she can think of no other way of forcing us to come promptly."

"It will force us, of course," I said, smiling.

"Oh yes," he replied; "there is a cab-rank near."

Basil scarcely said a word as we drove across Westminster Bridge, through Trafalgar Square, along Piccadilly, and up the Uxbridge Road. Only as he was opening the gate he spoke.

"I think you may take my word for it, my friend," he said, "this is one of the most queer and complicated and astounding incidents that ever happened in London or, for that matter, in any high civilization."

"I confess with the greatest sympathy and reverence that I don't quite see it," I said. "Is it so very extraordinary or complicated that a dreamy somnambulant old invalid who has always walked on the borders of the inconceivable should go mad under the shock of a great job? Is it so very extraordinary that a man with a head like a turnip and a soul like a spider's web should not find his strength equal to a confounding change of fortunes? Is it, in short, so very extraordinary that James Chadd should lose his wits from excitement?"

"It would not be extraordinary in the least," answered Basil, with placidity. "It would not be extraordinary in the least," he repeated, "if the professor had gone mad. That was not the extraordinary circumstance to which I referred."

"What," I asked, stamping my foot, "was the extraordinary thing?"

"The extraordinary thing," said Basil, ringing the bell, "is that he has not gone mad from excitement."

The tall and angular figure of the eldest Miss Chadd blocked the doorway as the door opened. Two other Miss Chadds seemed in the same way to be blocking the narrow passage and the little parlor. There was a general sense of their keeping something from view. They seemed like three black-clad ladies in some strange play of Maeterlinck, veiling the catastrophe from the audience in the manner of the Greek chorus.

"Sit down, won't you?" said one of them, in a voice that was somewhat rigid with pain. "I think you had better be told first what has happened."

Then, with her bleak face looking unmeaningly out of the window, she continued, in an even and mechanical voice:

"I had better state everything that occurred just as it occurred. This morning I was clearing away the breakfast things; my sisters were both somewhat unwell, and had not come down. My brother had just gone out of the room, I believe, to fetch a book. He came back again, however, without it, and stood for some time staring at the empty grate. I said, 'Were you looking for anything I could get?' He did not answer, but this constantly happens, as he is often very abstracted. I repeated my question, and still he did not answer. Sometimes he is so wrapped up in his studies that nothing but a touch on the shoulder would make him aware of one's presence, so I came round the table towards him. I really do not know how to describe the sensation which I then had. It seems simply silly, but at the moment it seemed something enormous, upsetting one's brain. The fact is, James was standing on one leg."

Grant smiled slowly and rubbed his hands with a kind of care.

"Standing on one leg?" I repeated.

"Yes," replied the dead voice of the woman, without an inflection to suggest that she felt the fantasticality of her statement.

"He was standing on the left leg and had the right drawn up at a sharp angle, the toe pointing downward. I asked him if his leg hurt him. His only answer was to shoot the leg straight at right angles to the other, as if pointing to the other with his toe to the wall. He was still looking quite gravely at the fireplace.

"James, what is the matter?" I cried, for I was thoroughly frightened. James gave three kicks in the air with the right leg, flung up the other, gave three kicks in the air with it also, and spun round like a teetotum the other way. 'Are you mad?' I cried. 'Why don't you answer me?' He had come to a standstill, facing me, and was looking at me as he always does, with his lifted eyebrows and great spectacled eyes. When I had spoken he remained a second or two motionless, and then his only reply was to lift his left foot slowly from the floor and describe circles with it in the air. I rushed to the door and shouted for Christina. I will not dwell on the dreadful hours that followed. All three of us talked to him, ran after him, tried to soothe him, tried to rouse him, implored him to speak with us with appeals that might have brought back the dead, but he has done nothing but hop and dance and kick with a solemn, silent face. It looks as if his leg belonged to some one else or were possessed by devils. He has never spoken to us from that time to this."

"Where is Professor Chadd now?" I said, getting up in some agitation. "We ought not to leave him alone."

"Dr. Colman is with him," said Miss Chadd, calmly. "They are in the garden. Dr. Colman thought the air would do him good. And he can scarcely go into the street."

Basil and I walked rapidly to the window which looked out on the garden. It was a small and somewhat smug suburban garden; the flowerbeds a little too neat and like the pattern of a colored carpet; but on this shining

and opulent summer day even they had the exuberance of something natural, I had almost said tropical. In the middle of a bright and verdant but painfully circular lawn stood two figures. One of them was a small, sharp-looking man with black whiskers and a very polished hat (I presume Dr. Colman), who was talking very quietly and clearly, yet with a nervous twitch, as it were, in his face. The other was our old friend listening with his old forbearing expression and owlish eyes, the strong sunlight gleaming on his glasses as the lamplight had gleamed the night before, when the boisterous Basil had rallied him on his studious decorum. But for one thing the figure of this morning might have been the identical figure of last night. That one thing was that while the face listened reposefully the legs were industriously dancing like the legs of a marionette. The neat flowers and the sunny glitter of the garden lent an indescribable sharpness and incredibility to the prodigy—the prodigy of the head of a hermit and the legs of a harlequin. For miracles should always happen in broad daylight. The night makes them credible and therefore commonplace.

The second sister had by this time entered the room and came somewhat drearily to the window.

"You know, Adelaide," she said, "that Mr. Bingham from the museum is coming again at three."

"I know," said Adelaide Chadd, bitterly. "I suppose we shall have to tell him about this. I thought that no good-fortune would ever come easily to us."

Grant suddenly turned round. "What do you mean?" he said. "What will you have to tell Mr. Bingham?"

"You know what I shall have to tell him," said the professor's sister, almost fiercely. "I don't know that we need give it its wretched name. Do you think that the keeper of Asiatic manuscripts will be allowed to go on like that?" And she pointed for an instant at the figure in the garden, the shining, listening face and the unresting feet.

Basil Grant took out his watch with an abrupt movement. "When did you say the British Museum man was coming?" he said.

"Three o'clock," said Miss Chadd, briefly.

"Then I have an hour before me," said Grant, and without another word threw up the window and jumped out into the garden. He did not walk straight up to the doctor and lunatic, but strolling round the garden path drew near them cautiously and yet apparently carelessly. He stood a couple of feet off them, seemingly counting halfpence out of his trousers-pocket, but, as I could see, looking up steadily under the broad brim of his hat.

Suddenly he stepped up to Professor Chadd's elbow, and said, in a loud, familiar voice, "Well, my boy, do you still think the Zulus our inferiors?"

The doctor knitted his brows and looked anxious, seeming to be about to speak. The professor turned his bald and placid head towards Grant in a friendly fashion, but made no answer, idly flinging his left leg about.

"Have you converted Dr. Colman to your views?" Basil continued, still in the same loud and lucid tone.

Chadd only shuffled his feet and kicked a little with the other leg, his expression still benevolent and inquiring. The doctor cut in rather sharply. "Shall we go inside, professor?" he said. "Now you have shown me the garden. A beautiful garden. A most beautiful garden. Let us go in," and he tried to draw the kicking ethnologist by the elbow, at the same time whispering to Grant: "I must ask you not to trouble him with questions. Most risky. He must be soothed."

Basil answered in the same tone, with great coolness:

"Of course your directions must be followed out, doctor. I will endeavor to do so, but I hope it will not be inconsistent with them if you will leave me alone with my poor friend in this garden for an hour. I want to watch him. I assure you, Dr. Colman, that I shall say very little to him, and that little shall be as soothing as—as sirup."

The doctor wiped his eye-glass thoughtfully.

"It is rather dangerous for him," he said, "to be long in this strong sun without his hat. With his bald head, too."

"That is soon settled," said Basil, composedly, and took off his own big hat and clapped it on the egglike skull of the professor. The latter did not turn round, but danced away with his eyes on the horizon.

The doctor put on his glasses again, looked severely at the two for some seconds, with his head on one side, like a bird's, and then saying, shortly, "All right," strutted away into the house, where the three Misses Chadd were all looking out from the parlor window on to the garden. They looked out on it with hungry eyes for a full hour without moving, and they saw a sight which was more extraordinary than madness itself.

Basil Grant addressed a few questions to the madman, without succeeding in making him do anything but continue to caper, and when he had done this he slowly took a red notebook out of one pocket and a large pencil out of another.

He began hurriedly to scribble notes. When the lunatic skipped away from him he would walk a few yards in pursuit, stop, and make notes again. Thus they followed each other round and round the foolish circle of turf, the one writing in pencil with the face of a man working out a problem, the other leaping and playing like a child.

After about three-quarters of an hour of this imbecile scene, Grant put the pencil in his pocket, but kept the notebook open in his hand, and, walking round the mad professor, planted himself directly in front of him.

Then occurred something that even those already used to that wild morning had not anticipated or dreamed. The professor, on finding Basil in front of him, stared with a blank benignity for a few seconds, and then drew up his left leg and hung it bent in the attitude that his sister had described as being the first of all his antics. And the moment he had done it Basil Grant lifted his own leg and held it out rigid before him, confronting Chadd

with the flat sole of his boot. The professor dropped his bent leg, and, swinging his weight on it, kicked out the other behind, like a man swimming. Basil crossed his feet like a saltier cross, and then flung them apart again, giving a leap into the air. Then, before any of the spectators could say a word or even entertain a thought about the matter, both of them were dancing a sort of jig or hornpipe opposite each other; and the sun shone down on two madmen instead of one.

They were so stricken with the deafness and blindness of monomania that they did not see the eldest Miss Chadd come out feverishly into the garden with gestures of entreaty, a gentleman following her. Professor Chadd was in the wildest posture of a *pas de quatre*. Basil Grant seemed about to turn a cartwheel, when they were frozen in their follies by the steely voice of Adelaide Chadd saying, "Mr. Bingham of the British Museum."

Mr. Bingham was a slim, well-clad gentleman with a pointed and slightly effeminate gray beard, unimpeachable gloves, and formal but agreeable manners. He was the type of the overcivilized, as Professor Chadd was of the uncivilized pedant. His formality and agreeableness did him some credit under the circumstances. He had a vast experience of books and a considerable experience of the more dilettante fashionable salons. But neither branch of knowledge had accustomed him to the spectacle of two gray-haired middle-class gentlemen in modern costume throwing themselves about like acrobats, as a substitute for an after-dinner nap.

The professor continued his antics with perfect placidity, but Grant stopped abruptly. The doctor had reappeared on the scene, and his shiny black eyes, under his shiny black hat, moved restlessly from one of them to the other.

"Dr. Colman," said Basil, turning to him, "will you entertain Professor Chadd again for a little while? I am sure that he needs you. Mr. Bingham, might I have the pleasure of a few moments' private conversation? My name is Grant."

Mr. Bingham of the British Museum bowed in a manner that was respectful but a trifle bewildered.

"Miss Chadd will excuse me," continued Basil, easily, "if I know my way about the house." And he led the dazed librarian rapidly through the back door into the parlor.

"Mr. Bingham," said Basil, setting a chair for him, "I imagine that Miss Chadd has told you of this distressing occurrence."

"She has, Mr. Grant," said Bingham, looking at the table with a sort of compassionate nervousness. "I am more pained than I can say by this dreadful calamity. It seems quite heart-trending that the thing should have happened just as we have decided to give your eminent friend a position which falls far short of his merits. As it is, of course—really, I don't know what to say. Professor Chadd may, of course, retain—I sincerely trust he will—his extraordinarily valuable intellect. But I am afraid—I am really afraid—

that it would not do to have the curator of the Asiatic manuscripts—er—dancing about."

"I have a suggestion to make," said Basil, and sat down abruptly in his chair, drawing it up to the table.

"I am delighted, of course," said the gentleman from the British Museum, coughing and drawing up his chair also.

The clock on the mantel-piece ticked for just the moments required for Basil to clear his throat and collect his words, and then he said:

"My proposal is this. I do not know that in the strict use of words you could altogether call it a compromise. Still, it has something of that character. My proposal is that the government (acting, as I presume, through your museum) should pay Professor Chadd £800 a year until he stops dancing."

"Eight hundred a year," said Mr. Bingham, and for the first time lifted his mild blue eyes to those of his interlocutor—and he raised them with a mild blue stare. "I think I have not quite understood you. Did I understand you to say that Professor Chadd ought to be employed in his present state, in the Asiatic manuscript department at eight hundred a year?"

Grant shook his head resolutely.

"No," he said, firmly. "No. Chadd is a friend of mine, and I would say anything for him I could. But I do not say, I cannot say, that he ought to take on the Asiatic manuscripts. I do not go so far as that. I merely say that until he stops dancing you ought to pay him £800. Surely you have some general fund for the endowment of research."

Mr. Bingham looked bewildered.

"I really don't know," he said, blinking his eyes, "what you are talking about. Do you ask us to give this obvious lunatic nearly a thousand a year for life?"

"Not at all," cried Basil, keenly and triumphantly. "I never said for life. Not at all."

"What for, then?" asked the meek Mr. Bingham, suppressing an instinct meekly to tear his hair. "How long is this endowment to run? Not till his death? Till the judgement-day?"

"No," said Basil, beaming, "but just what I said. Till he has stopped dancing." And he lay back with satisfaction and his hands in his pockets.

Bingham had by this time fastened his eyes keenly on Basil Grant and kept them there.

"Come, Mr. Grant," he said. "Do I seriously understand you to suggest that the government pay Professor Chadd an extraordinarily high salary simply on the ground that he is flinging his boots about the backyard?"

"Precisely," said Grant, composedly.

"That this absurd payment is not only to run on with the absurd dancing, but actually to stop with the absurd dancing?"

"One must stop somewhere," said Grant. "Of course."

Bingham rose and took up his perfect stick and gloves.

"There is really nothing more to be said, Mr. Grant," he said coldly.

"What you are trying to explain to me may be a joke—a slightly unfeeling joke. It may be your sincere view, in which case I ask your pardon for the former suggestion. But, in any case, it appears quite irrelevant to my duties. The mental morbidity, the mental downfall, of Professor Chadd is a thing so painful to me that I cannot easily endure to speak of it. But it is clear there is a limit to everything. And if the Archangel Gabriel went mad it would sever his connection, I am sorry to say, with the British Museum Library."

He was stepping towards the door, but Grant's hand, flung out in dramatic warning, arrested him.

"Stop!" said Basil, sternly. "Stop while there is yet time. Do you want to take part in a great work, Mr. Bingham? Do you want to help in the glory of Europe—in the glory of science? Do you want to carry your head in the air when it is bald or white, because of the part that you bore in a great discovery? Do you want—"

Bingham cut in sharply:

"And if I do want this, Mr. Grant—"

"Then," said Basil, lightly, "your task is easy. Get Chadd £800 a year till he stops dancing."

With a fierce flap of his swinging gloves, Bingham turned impatiently to the door, but in passing out of it found it blocked. Dr. Colman was coming in.

"Forgive me, gentlemen," he said, in a nervous, confidential voice, "the fact is, Mr. Grant, I—er—have made a most disturbing discovery about Mr. Chadd."

Bingham looked at him with grave eyes. "I was afraid so," he said. "Drink, I imagine."

"Drink!" echoed Colman, as if that were a much milder affair. "Oh no, it's not drink."

Mr. Bingham became somewhat agitated, and his voice grew hurried and vague. "Homicidal mania—" he began.

"No, no," said the medical man, impatiently.

"Think he's made of glass," said Bingham, feverishly, "or says he's God—or—"

"No," said Dr. Colman, sharply, "the fact is, Mr. Grant, my discovery is of a different character. The awful thing about him is—"

"Oh, go on, sir," cried Bingham, in agony.

"The awful thing about him is," repeated Colman, with deliberation, "that he isn't mad."

"Not mad!"

"There are quite well-known physical tests of lunacy," said the doctor, shortly, "he hasn't got any of them."

"But why does he dance?" cried the despairing Bingham. "Why doesn't he answer us? Why hasn't he spoken to his family?"

"The devil knows," said Dr. Colman, coolly. "I'm paid to judge of lunatics, but not of fools. The man's not mad."

"What on earth can it mean? Can't we make him listen?" said Mr. Bingham. "Can none get into any kind of communication with him?"

Grant's voice struck in sudden and clear, like a steel bell.

"I shall be very happy," he said, "to give him any message you like to send."

Both men stared at him.

"Give him a message?" they cried, simultaneously. "How will you give him a message?"

Basil smiled in his slow way.

"If you really want to know how I shall give him your message—" he began, but Bingham cried:

"Of course, of course," with a sort of frenzy.

"Well," said Basil, "like this." And he suddenly sprang a foot into the air, coming down with crashing boots, and then stood on one leg.

His face was stern, though this effect was slightly spoiled by the fact that one of his feet was making wild circles in the air.

"You drive me to it," he said. "You drive me to betray my friend. And I will, for his own sake, betray him."

The sensitive face of Bingham took on an extra expression of distress as of one anticipating some disgraceful disclosure. "Anything painful, of course—" he began.

Basil let his loose foot fall on the carpet with a crash that struck them all rigid in their feeble attitudes.

"Idiots!" he cried. "Have you seen the man? Have you looked at James Chadd going dismally to and fro from his dingy house to your miserable library, with his futile books and his confounded umbrella, and never seen that he has the eyes of a fanatic? Have you never noticed, stuck casually behind his spectacles and above his seedy old collar, the face of a man who might have burned heretics or died for the philosopher's stone? It is all my fault, in a way; I lit the dynamite of his deadly faith. I argued against him on the score of his famous theory about language—the theory that language was complete in certain individuals and was picked up by others simply by watching them. I also chaffed him about not understanding things in rough and ready practice. What has this glorious bigot done? He has answered me. He has worked out a system of language of his own (it would take too long to explain); he has made up, I say, a language of his own. And he has sworn that till people understand it, till he can speak to us in this language, he will not speak in any other. And he shall not. I have understood, by taking careful notice; and, by Heaven, so shall the others. This shall not be blown upon. He shall finish his experiment. He shall have £800 a year from somewhere till he has stopped dancing. To stop him now is an infamous war on a great idea. It is religious persecution."

Mr. Bingham held out his hand cordially.

"I thank you, Mr. Grant," he said. "I hope I shall be able to answer for the source of the £800, and I fancy that I shall. Will you come in my cab?"

"No, thank you very much, Mr. Bingham," said Grant, heartily, "I think I will go and have a chat with the professor in the garden."

The conversation between Chadd and Grant appeared to be personal and friendly. They were still dancing when I left.

# *The Pink Caterpillar*

by Anthony Boucher

*The magic of the South Seas, the mystery of time, and the ancient dread of witchcraft are combined here to make an unforgettable horror story. Anthony Boucher, the author, started as a writer of detective novels, and achieved a high standing in that field. In fact, we understand that he was recently elected president of the Mystery Writers of America, a sort of trade union for the profession. But he has also shown himself to be an enthusiastic fantasist, contributing occasional stories of high merit to the various magazines. We found this one in an issue of Adventure, which makes us feel that it will be surely new to those fans who prefer to look for their fantasy exclusively in undiluted bottles.*

*N*

ORM HARKER said, "Their medicine men can do time travel, too. At least, that's the firm belief everywhere on the island: a *thalala* can go forward in time and bring back any single item you specify, for a price. We used to spend the night watches speculating on what would be the one best thing to order."

Norman hadn't told us the name of the island. The stripe and a half on his sleeve lent him discretion; and Tokyo hadn't learned yet what secret installations the Navy had been busy with on that minute portion of the South Pacific. He couldn't talk about the installations, of course; but the island had provided him with plenty of other matters to keep us entertained, sitting up there on the Top of the Mark.

"What would you order, Tony," he asked, "with a *carte blanche* like that on the future?"

"How far future?"

"They say a *thalala* goes to one hundred years from date, no more, no less."

"Money wouldn't work," I mused. "Jewels, maybe. Or a gadget—any gadget—and you could invent it as of now and make a fortune. But then it

might depend on principles not yet worked out. . . . Or the *Gone With the Wind* of the twenty-first century—but publish it now and it could lay an egg. Can you imagine today's best sellers trying to compete with Dickens? No, it's a tricky question. What did you try?"

"We finally settled on Hitler's tombstone. Think of the admission tickets we could sell to see that!"

"And?"

"And nothing. We couldn't pay the *tu-dadd's* price. For each article fetched through time he wanted one virgin from the neighboring island. We felt the staff somehow might not understand if we went collecting them. There's always a catch to magic," Norman concluded lightly.

Fergus O'Brien said, "Uh-huh," and nodded gravely. He hadn't been saying much all evening—just sitting there and looking out over the panorama of the Bay by night, a glistening joy, now that dimout was over, and taking in Norm's stories. I still don't know the sort of work he's been doing, but it's changing him, toning him down.

But even a toned-down Irishman can stand only so much silence, and there was obviously a story ready on his lips. Norm asked, "You've been running into magic, too?"

"Not lately." Fergus held his drink up to the light. "Damned if I know why writers always call a highball an amber liquid," he observed. "Start a cliché and it sticks. . . . Like about detectives being hard-headed realists. Didn't you ever stop to think that there's hardly another profession outside the clergy that's so apt to run up against the things beyond realism? Why do you call in a detective? Because something screwy's going on and you need an explanation. And if there isn't an explanation. . . .

"This was back a ways. Back when I didn't have anything worse to deal with than murderers, and once a werewolf. But he was a hell of a swell guy. The murderers I used to think were pretty thorough low-lifes, but now. . . . Anyway, this was back then. I was down in Mexico putting the finishing touches on a case when I heard from Dan Rafetti, I think you know him, Tony—he's an investigator for Southwest National Life Insurance, and he's thrown some business my way now and then.

"This one sounded interesting. Nothing spectacular, you understand, and probably no money to speak of. But the kind of crazy, unexplained little detail that stirs up the O'Brien curiosity. Very simple: Southwest gets a claim from a beneficiary. One of their customers died down in Mexico, and his sister wants the cash. They sent to the Mexican authorities for a report on his death and it was heart failure and that's that. Only the policy is made out to Mr. Frank Miller and the Mexican report refers to him as Dr. F. Miller. They ask the sister and she's certain he hadn't any right to such a title. So I happen to be right near Tlachotl, where he died, and would I please kind of nose around and see was there anything phony, like maybe an imposture. Photographs and fingerprints—from a civil service application he once made—enclosed."

"Nice businesslike beginning," Norm said.

Fergus nodded. "That's the way it started, all very routine, yours-of-the-27th-salt. Prosaic like. And Tlachotl was prosaic enough, too. Maybe to a tourist it'd be picturesque, but I'd been kicking around these Mexican mountain towns long enough so one seemed as commonplace as another. Sort of a montage of flat houses and white trousers and dogs and children and an old church and an almost-as-old *pulqueria* and one that plays a hell of a guitar on Saturday nights.

"Tlachotl wasn't much different. There was a mine near it, and just out of town was a bunch of drab new frame houses for the American engineers. Everybody in town worked in the mine—all pure Indians, with those chaste profiles straight off of Aztec murals that begin to seem like the only right and normal human face when you've been among 'em long enough.

"I went to the doctor first. He was the government sanitation agent and health instructor, and the town looked like he was doing a good job. His English was better than my Spanish and he was glad I like tequila. Yes, he remembered Dr. Miller. He checked up his records, announced that Dr. M. had died on November Second. It was January when I talked to him. Simple death: heart failure. He'd had several attacks in the previous weeks, and the doctor had expected him to go any day. All of a sudden a friend he hadn't seen in years showed up in town unannounced, and the shock did it. Any little thing might have.

"The doctor wasn't a stupid man, or a careless one. I was willing to take his word that the death was natural—and maybe I ought to put in here, before your devious minds start getting ahead of me, that as far as I ever learned he was absolutely right. Common- or garden-variety of heart failure, and that didn't fit into any picture of insurance fraud. But there was still the inconsistency of the title, and I went on, 'Must've been kind of nice for you to have a colleague here to talk with?'

"The doctor frowned a little at that. It seemed he'd been sort of hurt by Dr. Miller's attitude. He'd tried to interest him in some researches he was doing with an endemic variant of undulant fever, which he'd practically succeeded in wiping out. But the North American doctor just didn't give a damn. No fraternal spirit, no scientific curiosity, nothing.

"I gathered they hadn't been very friendly, my doctor and Dr. Miller. In fact, Miller hadn't been intimate with anybody, not even the other North Americans at the mine. He liked the Indians and they liked him, though they were a little scared of him on account of the skeleton—apparently an anatomical specimen and the first thing I'd heard of to go with his assumed doctorate. He had a good shortwave radio and he listened to music on that and sketched a little and read and went for short hikes. It sounded like a good life, if you like a lonely one. The doc thought they might know a little more about him at the *pulqueria*; he stopped there for a drink sometimes. And the widow Sanchez kept house for him; she might know something.

"I tried the widow first. She wore a shapeless black dress that looked as though she'd started mourning Mr. Sanchez ten years ago, but the youngest wasn't quite walking yet. She liked her late employer, might he rest in peace. He was a good man, and so little trouble. No, he never gave medicine to anybody; that was the job of the *señor médico* from Mexico City. No, he never did anything with bottles. No, he never received much mail and surely not with money in it, for she often saw him open his few letters. But yes, indeed, he was a *médico*; did he not have the bones, the *esqueleto* to prove it?

"And if the *señor* interested himself so much in *el doctor* Miller, perhaps the *señor* would care to see his house? It was untouched, as he left it. No one lived there now. No, it was not haunted—at least, not that anyone knew, though no man knows about such things. It was only that no one new ever comes to live in Tlachotl, and an empty house stays empty.

"I looked the house over. It had two rooms and a kitchen and a tiny patio. Dr. Miller's things were undisturbed; no one had claimed them, and it was up to time and heat and insects to take care of them. There was the radio and beside it the sketching materials. One wall was a bookcase, well filled, mostly with sixteenth and seventeenth century literature in English and Spanish. The books had been faithfully read. There were a few recent volumes, mostly on travel or on Mexican Indian culture, and a few magazines. No medical books or periodicals.

"Food, cooking utensils, clothing, a pile of sketches—good enough so you'd feel all right when you'd done them and bad enough so you wouldn't feel urged to exhibit them—pipes and tobacco. These just about made up the inventory. No papers to speak of, a few personal letters, mostly from his sister (and beneficiary). No instruments or medicines of any kind. Nothing whatsoever out of the way—not even the skeleton.

"I'd heard about that twice, so I asked what had become of it. The sons of the mining engineers, the young demons, had stolen it to celebrate a gringo holiday, which I gathered had been Halloween. They had built an enormous bonfire and the skeleton had fallen in and been consumed. The doctor Miller had been very angry; he had suffered one of his attacks then, almost as bad as the one that gave him death, may the Lord hold him in his kindness. But now it was time for a mother to return and feed her brood; her house was mine, and would the *señor* join in her poor supper?

"The beans were good and the tortillas were wonderful; and the youngest children hadn't ever seen red hair before and had some pointed questions to ask me about mine. And in the middle of the meal something suddenly went *click* in my brain and I knew why Frank Miller had called himself doctor."

Fergus paused and beckoned to a waiter.

Norman said, "Is that all?"

"For the moment. I'm giving you boys a chance to scintillate. There you have all the factors up to that point. All right: *Why* was Miller calling himself doctor?"

"He wasn't practicing," Norman said slowly. "And he wasn't even run-

ning a fake medical racket by mail, as people have done from Mexico to avoid the U. S. Post Office Department."

"And," I added, "he hadn't assumed the title to impress people, to attain social standing, because he had nothing to do with his neighbors. And he wasn't carrying on any experiments or research for which he might have needed the title in his writings. So he gained nothing in cash or prestige. All right, what other reason is there for posing as a doctor?"

"Answer," said Fergus leisurely, "he wasn't posing as a doctor. Look: you might pose as a doctor with no props at all, thinking no one would come in your house but the housekeeper. Or you might stage an elaborate front complete with instrument cabinets and five-pound books. But you wouldn't try it with just one prop—an anatomical skeleton."

Norman and I looked at each other and nodded. It made sense. "Well, then?" I asked.

The fresh drinks came and Fergus said, "My round. . . . Well, then, the skeleton was not a prop for the medical pose. Quite the reverse. Turn it around and it makes sense. He called himself a doctor *to account for the skeleton.*"

I choked on my first sip and Norman spluttered a little, too. Fergus went on eagerly, with that keen light in his green eyes, "You can't hide a skeleton in a tiny house. The housekeeper's bound to see it, and word gets around. Miller liked the Indians, and he liked peace. He had to account for the skeleton. So he became a doctor."

"But that—" Norman objected, "that's no kind of answer. That's just another question."

"I know," said Fergus. "But that's the first big step in detection: to find the right question. And that's it: Why does a man live with a skeleton?"

We were silent for a little while. The Top of the Mark was full of glasses and smoke and uniforms; and despite the uniforms it seemed a room set aside that was not part of a world at war—still less, of a world in which a man might live with a skeleton.

"Of course you checked the obvious answer," I said at last.

Fergus nodded. "He couldn't very well have been a black magician, if that's what you mean, or white either. Not a book or a note in the whole place dealing with the subject. No wax, chalk, incense or what-have-you. The skeleton doesn't fit any more into a magical pattern than into a medical one."

"The Dead Beloved?" Norman suggested, hesitantly uttering the phrases in mocking capitals. "Rose-for-Emily stuff? A bit grisly, but not inconceivable."

"The Mexican doctor saw the skeleton. It was a man, and not a young one."

"Then he was planning an insurance fraud—burn the house down and let the bones be found while he vanished."

"A, You don't burn adobe. B, You don't let the skeleton be seen by the

doctor who'll examine it later. *C*, It was a much taller man than Miller."

"A writer?" I ventured wildly. "I've sometimes thought myself a skeleton might be useful in the study—to check where to inflict skull wounds and such."

"With no typewriter, no manuscripts, and very little mail?"

Norman's face lit up. "You said he sketched. Maybe he was working on a modern *Totentanz*—dance-of-death allegory. Holbein and Dürer must have had a skeleton or two around."

"I saw his sketches. Landscapes only."

I lit my pipe and settled back. "All right. We've stooged, and we don't know. Now tell us why a man keeps house with a set of bones." My tone was lighter than necessary.

Fergus said, "I won't go into all the details of my investigations. I saw damned near every adult in Tlachotl and most of the kids. And I pieced out what I think is the answer. But you ought to be able to gather it from the evidence of four people.

"First, Jim Reilly, mining engineer. Witness deposeth and saith he was on the main street, if you can call it that, of Tlachotl on November second. He saw Dr. Miller walking along 'like in a kind of nervous haze.' He saw a stranger, 'swarthy but not a Mex,' walk up to Miller and say, 'Frank!' Miller looked up and was astonished. The stranger said, 'Sorry for the delay. But it took me a little time to get here.' And he hadn't finished the sentence before Miller dropped dead. Queried about stranger, witness says he gave his name as Humbert Targ. He stayed around town a few days for the funeral and then left. Said he'd known Miller a long time ago—never clear quite where, but seemingly in the South Seas, as we used to say before we learned to call it the South Pacific. Asked for description, witness proved pretty useless: medium height, medium age, dark complexion, . . . Only helpful details: stranger wore old clothes. 'Shabby?' 'No, just old.' 'Out-of-date?' 'I guess so.' 'How long ago? What kind?' 'I don't know. Just old—funny-looking.' He had only one foot. 'One leg?' 'No, two legs just one foot.' 'Wooden peg?' 'No, just empty trouser cuff. Walked with a cane.'

"Second witness, Father Gonzaga—and it's a funny sensation talking to a priest who wears just a plain business suit. He hadn't known Dr. Miller well, though he'd said a mass for his soul. But one night Miller came from the *pulqueria* to the priest's house and insisted on talking to him. He wanted to know how you could ever get right with God and yourself if you'd done someone a great wrong and there was no conceivable way you could make it up to him. The padre asked why, was the injured person dead? Miller hesitated and didn't answer. 'He's alive, then?' 'Oh, no, no!' 'Restitution could surely be made to the next of kin if it were a money matter?' 'No, it's personal.' Father's advice was to pray for the injured party's soul and for grace to avoid such temptation another time. I don't see much what else he could have suggested, but Miller wasn't satisfied."

I wasn't hearing the noise around us any more. Norman was leaning for-

ward, too, and I saw in his eyes that he, too, was beginning to feel the essential *wrongness* of the case that the detective had stumbled on.

"Third witness, the widow Sanchez. She told me some more about the skeleton when I came back for more beans and brought a bottle of red wine to go with them, which it did magnificently. Miller had treasured his skeleton very highly. She was supposed not even to dust it. But once she forgot and dusted it, and a finger came off. This was in October. She thought he might not notice a missing finger, but she knew she'd catch it if he found a loose one; so she burned the bones in the charcoal brazier over which she fried her tortillas. Two days later she was serving the doctor his dinner when she saw a pink caterpillar crawling near his place. She'd never seen a pink caterpillar before. She flicked it away with a napkin, but not before the doctor saw it. He jumped up from the table and ran to look at the skeleton and gave her a terrific bawling-out. After that she saw the caterpillar several times. It was about then that Miller started having these heart attacks. Whenevver she saw the caterpillar it was crawling toward the doctor. I looked at her a long time while she finished the wine, and then I said, 'Was it a caterpillar?' She crossed herself and said, 'No.' She said it very softly and that was all she said that night."

I looked down at the table. My hand lay there and the index finger was tapping gently. We sat in quite a draft, and I shuddered.

"Fourth witness, Timmy Reilly, twelve-year-old son of Jim. He thought it was a great lark that they'd stolen the old boy's bones for Halloween. Fun and games. 'These dopes down here didn't know from nothin' about Halloween but him and the gang, they sure showed 'em.' But I could see he was holding something back. I made a swap. He could wear my detective badge (which I've never worn yet) for a whole day if he'd tell me what else he knew. So he showed it to me: the foot that he'd rescued when the skeleton was burned up. He'd tried to grab the bones as they toppled over and all he could reach was the heel. He had the whole foot, well-articulated and lousy with tarsals and stuff. So I made a better deal: he could have the badge for keeps—with the number scratched out a little—if he'd let me burn the foot. He let me."

Fergus paused, and it all began to click into place. The pattern was clear, and it was a pattern that should not be.

"You've got it now?" Fergus said quietly. "All I needed to make it perfect was Norm's story. There had to be such things as *tuulalas*, with such powers as theirs. I'd deduced them, but it's satisfying to have them confirmed.

"Miller had an enemy many years ago—a man who had sworn to kill him. And Miller knew a *tuulala*, back there in the South Seas. And when he asked himself what would be the best single item to bring back from the future, he knew the answer: *his enemy's skeleton*.

"It wasn't murder. He probably had scruples about that. He sounded like a good enough guy in a way, and maybe his *tuulala* asked a more possible

price than Norm's. The skeleton was the skeleton that would exist naturally a hundred years from now, no matter how or when the enemy died. But bring that skeleton back here, and the enemy can no longer exist. His skeleton can't be two places at once. You've got the dry dead bones. What becomes of the live ones with flesh on them? You don't know. You don't care. You're safe. You're free to lead the peaceful life you want with Indians and mountain scenery and your sketch pad and your radio. And your skeleton.

"You've got to be careful of that skeleton. If it ceases to exist in this time, the full-fleshed living skeleton might return. You mustn't ever take a chance on the destruction of a little piece. You lose a finger, and a finger returns—a pink thing that crawls, and always toward you.

"Then the skeleton itself is destroyed—all but one foot. You're in mortal terror, but nothing happens. Two days go by, and it's November second. You know what the second of November is like in Latin America? It's All Souls Day in the churches, and they call it the *Día de los difuntos*—the Day of the Dead. But it isn't a sad day, outside of church. You go to the cemetery, and it's a picnic. There are skeletons everywhere, same as Halloween—bright, funny skeletons that never hurt anybody. And there are skulls to wear and skulls to drink out of, and bright white sugar skulls with pink and green trimmings to eat. All along every street are vendors with skulls and skeletons for every purpose, and every kid you see has a sugar skull to suck. Then at night you go to the theater to see *Don Juan Tenorio*, in which the graves open and the skeletons dance, while back home the kids are howling themselves to sleep because skulls are so indigestible.

"Of course, there's no theater in Tlacholl, but you can bet there'd be skulls and skeletons, some of them dressed up like Indian gods for the Christian feast, some of them dancing on wires, some of them vanishing down small gullets. And there you are in the midst of skeletons, skeletons everywhere, and your skeleton is gone and all your safety with it. And there on the street with all the skulls dipping and bowing at you, you see him and he isn't a skull any more. He's Humbert Targ, only with just one foot and he's explaining that it took a little time to get here.

"Wouldn't you drop dead?" Fergus concluded simply.

My throat felt dry as I asked, "What did you tell the insurance company?"

"Much like Norm's theory. Man was an artist, had an anatomical model, gave out he was a doctor to keep the natives from convulsion fits. The prints they sent me fitted what I found in his home and they had to pay the sister. Collected expenses but no bonus."

Norman cleared his throat. "I'm beginning to hope they don't send me back to the island."

"Afraid you might get too tempted by a *thalala*?"

"No. But on the island we really do have pink caterpillars. I'm not sure I could face them."

"There's one thing I still wonder," Fergus said reflectively. "Where was

Humbert Targ while his skeleton hung at Miller's side? Or should I say *when* was he? He said, 'It took a little time to get here.' From where? From when? And what kind of time?"

There are some questions you don't even try to answer.

# *The Phantom Dictator*

*by Wallace West*

*Television has taken the country by storm. What changes it will make in the political life of the nation remain to be seen. We have had an instance already in the recent Kefauver Committee hearings of how it can concentrate a far greater public attention on a political matter than would have been the case in pre-TV days. The following story does not deal with TV, but with the motion picture as a medium, but its message has an even more pertinent bearing on TV. Without radio, Hitler hardly could have achieved the grip on the German mind that he did. What would the systematic use of TV and modern methods of mass suggestion do for a future Hitler? Wallace West, who was at one time connected with an animated-cartoon company, writes from experience of what could be done in that medium.*

  
CAME BACK to New York from a six weeks' fishing trip in Canada to discover that a new craze was sweeping the United States.

"Have you seen the latest Willy Pan picture?"  
"Don't you think Willy Pan is just too cute for words?"  
"Yeah. And do you remember what Willy Pan said when he met the musk ox?"

"Willy Pan says——"  
Such were the incomprehensible snatches of conversation that I overheard in Grand Central Station, on the subway and in the lobby of my apartment building.

"—but I thought the best part was when Willy Pan went down to Washington and showed the President how to run the government," Miss Hawkins was telling a patient when I entered my office the next morning. "You know, there was an awful lot of good sense to what he said——"

"Who or what is this Willy Pan?" I exploded. "Never since the days when 'Ish-ka-bibble' and 'You're telling me' took the place of conversation have I heard such a lot of senseless talk."

"Why, Dr. Brown," exclaimed the nurse, opening her blue eyes im-

measurably, "do you mean to tell me you haven't seen the new motion picture cartoon? Why, it's better than the 'Three Little Pigs.' Willy Pan is the hero and he's just too cute for words. You should have seen him when he met the musk ox—"

"Yes. Yes," I said impatiently when she gave indications of continuing at great length. "But there's a patient waiting and I must get to work—"

"You simply must see Willy Pan as soon as possible." Miss Hawkins fluttered her eyelids provocatively. "His new picture is opening to-night at the theater around the corner. Maybe we could go see it?"

"We?" I stammered, startled by these advances from a girl who had always seemed the soul of competence and detachment. "Well—er—we can talk about that later." I retreated to the consulting room.

Even there I was not immune. Instead of reveling in a description of his symptoms, my patient insisted on telling the story about Willy Pan and the musk ox. The point of the tale was incomprehensible to me, but he went into gales of laughter at the climax and seemed deeply hurt—almost insulted—when I did not join him.

And there was something about the man's eyes which puzzled me. They had a slightly glassy fixation. Acting on a hunch, I tested his reflexes. He had no reflexes! Yet, otherwise he seemed normal except for an extreme nervousness and excitability. This development puzzled me so much that I forgot Willy Pan in prescribing a tonic, complete rest, quiet, etc. Finally I got rid of the fellow after promising to see the new cartoon at the very first opportunity.

I had a busy day, for it seemed that all of my patients were developing some sort of nervous trouble. They arrived in a steady stream, but to save my soul I could make no diagnoses. A psychiatrist solves his problems by delving into the minds of those who consult him.

But to-day I could not do that. Something was blocking the process of free association and that something, I became convinced as the hours passed, was nothing else but the shadowy person of Willy Pan! The situation was beyond my comprehension and I had a first-class case of jitters myself when I put on my hat and prepared to leave for home at the end of office hours.

But I had reckoned without Miss Hawkins.

"Oh, Dr. Brown," she gurgled as I passed her in the outer office. "You haven't forgotten your promise to take me to see Willy Pan, have you?"

Good night! Had she finally developed a complex about becoming an old maid? Then, gazing into those wide, blue eyes, I realized that this diagnosis also was incorrect. Miss Hawkins wasn't trying to charm me. She was simply determined that I had to see Willy Pan, even if it were necessary for her to drag me to the theater. There was some inner compulsion upon her.

"Why, of course, I hadn't forgotten," I answered, deciding to get to the bottom of this mystery once and for all. "Shall we have dinner before we go?"

"Oh no! We must see the first show." She snatched up her coat. "I can hardly wait."

When we reached the theater we found a milling crowd out side, fighting to get to the ticket booth. Police lines had been formed to control the mob. Somehow we reached the lobby and after standing for an hour, obtained seats in the last row of the balcony.

A feature picture was on the screen at the time but no one was paying the slightest attention to it. Instead, a hum of conversation filled the dimly lighted auditorium. Every one was talking to his neighbors as though they had been old friends.

At last the feature ended with the inevitable clinch. Immediately the theater was pervaded by a deathlike silence as the screen blossomed with the title:

WILLY PAN  
IN  
THE MAGICIAN  
Produced by  
AMERICAN STUDIOS, INC.  
Copyright 1953

"Now you'll see him," whispered Miss Hawkins as a strain of music from the "Moonlight Sonata" filled the auditorium.

When I did see the cause of all this excitement I got a distinct shock. Although I knew Willy Pan to be a pen-and-ink creation by some master animator, the result was so lifelike as to be uncanny.

Willy himself was eerie enough, with his misshapen goat's legs, pointed ears and engaging, pathetic smile. Somehow he was reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin. Perhaps it was this element of pathos which had so endeared him to a world beaten down by the never-ending economic depression.

But it was the background in which the creature moved that intrigued me most. Not only was the picture presented in natural colors, but by a new advance in screen technique it had a lifelike three-dimensional effect. As Willy wandered from the far distance into the foreground he seemed to leave the screen and step into the same world with his audience.

"I told you. He *is* real," exclaimed my companion, and I was half convinced that she was right.

The ingatiating satyr wore a ragged dress suit and a battered felt hat. He carried a wand which sparkled at the end with varicolored, spinning lights. He revealed himself as a magician traveling with a bedraggled medicine show. The first few minutes of the film were highly amusing in the best "Micky Mouse" tradition and caused the audience to scream with laughter as Willy proceeded to solve world problems and extricate himself from ridiculous and menacing predicaments by the use of his wand.

It was that wand which gave me a clue to the secret, but that clue came almost too late. Unconsciously my eyes had focused on the flickering light which blossomed at the end of the stick. As they did so I felt myself being overcome by a pleasant lethargy which somehow seemed to lure me on toward that strange world in which Willy had his being. It would be so easy to let go—

But another part of my mind still struggled to find an explanation for some problem which kept eluding me, as problems do when one is overcome by fatigue or sleep. Where had I seen such a wand before—searchlights—electrical discharges—reflections on a wet street at night?

The answer came with such a shock that I was jerked out of my reverie as by a dash of icy water. It had been in Vienna—years ago—when, at a convention of psychiatrists, a delegate had used just such a glittering device to prove that mass hypnotism was a possibility! He had not convinced the skeptics, but—these people beside me were not skeptics!

I gripped the arms of my seat and gasped for breath. Something evil was going on here. I must not—I dare not succumb!

With a terrific effort I tore my glance from the screen and looked about me. The members of the audience were staring straight ahead like so many wax figures. I listened. Except for the voice from the screen, there was not a sound. For the first time in my life I was in a theater where nobody coughed!

Leaning over, I pinched Miss Hawkins on the arm. Although it must have hurt, she did not respond. Not a tremor passed through her tensed body. She was sleeping—with open eyes.

Clenching my teeth, I glanced back at the screen. Willy Pan had disappeared. Instead, the sheet was covered by writhing, many-colored shadows which whirled into strange, dreamlike conformations, like those which form under the closed eyelids of a person just sinking into sleep.

But Willy's slumberous voice still filled the auditorium.

"My friends," it murmured, "you are asleep, but you still hear my voice. You are bowed down by the great depression. Many of you do not have jobs. Some of you are hungry. Others have begged a few pennies with which to pay admission to this theater.

"Willy is going to change all that for you. Willy is going to provide jobs and plenty of money for everyone. Willy is going to punish the rich and reward the poor by dividing the country's wealth. Willy can provide an income of five thousand dollars a year for every man, woman and child in the United States—"

As the voice droned on, the whole amazing scheme was revealed to me. Someone, somewhere, had at last perfected the trick of hypnotizing people en masse instead of individually. Someone had rediscovered the secret of the old Hindu rope trick. Someone was in a position to wield power sufficient to make him master of the earth.

The voice was so compelling, so reassuring that I was tempted for a

moment to believe that such power might be wielded for the good of humanity. Almost did I succumb to its charm. But then, I reasoned, would anyone able to control the minds of millions of people use such power for their benefit instead of his own?

"In a few days," the voice was continuing, "the new order will begin. Heaven on earth will be at hand. Obey my wishes in this matter. I am working only for your good. If there is a man, woman or child in America who has not seen my pictures, make it your duty to bring him to the next showing. And if anyone speaks evil of Willy Pan, denounce him. He is your enemy and mine. Now good night, my friends, until next week."

As the concluding strains of the "Moonlight Sonata" drifted from the loud-speakers the audience stirred and sighed like an army aroused from sleep. Then came a tremendous burst of applause interspersed with whistles and shouts of approval.

"Didn't you just love him?" inquired Miss Hawkins as we moved with the crowd toward the exit.

"He was marvelous," I admitted a trifle shakily. "But what happened after the episode where he charmed the king's crown onto his own head? I think I must have dozed for a moment."

"Why that was the end of the picture, silly." She laughed. "The closing music started just after that."

"Of course. Of course. Well, I'm glad I didn't miss anything." Her answer had confirmed my suspicions. The conscious mind of the audience had not recorded a word of Willy's concluding speech. But in the subconscious his words were having their deadly effect.

My confirmation of this belief came next morning when newspapers blazoned forth the information that the government had started a drive to end the depression by making the United States entirely self-sufficient. The first concrete steps were the taking over of all coal mines, railroads and other public utilities; the inauguration of universal conscription and the deportation of all foreigners.

There seemed only one thing left for me to do. I took the next train to Washington. I would try to see the President and warn him before it was too late.

But, despite my nation-wide fame as a psychiatrist, I made no progress at the nation's Capitol. True, I did see the underscretary of an undescretary, but when I broached the object of my visit he laughed me to scorn.

"Willy Pan a menace?" he jeered as he rubbed his hands together nervously. "Why you must be out of your mind, Dr. Brown. I've seen every one of his pictures. They're perfectly harmless."

After a number of similar rebuffs I changed my tactics. I called the White House for an appointment and explained that I had devised a scheme for wider distribution of the famous cartoons.

This time there was no delay. An hour later I was in the presence of the

great man. He was smiling and jovial, yet I noticed that his facial muscles twitched repeatedly as though he were under great strain.

"Well, Dr. Brown," he beamed, "I've heard of you often and am glad to meet you in person. They tell me you're another supporter of Willy Pan. I'm glad that you approve of our new national hero. Now what is your plan?"

"Mr. President," I began hesitantly, "I am, as you say, friendly to this new diversion, but I'm afraid the people are taking it a bit too seriously. They are too preoccupied for good balance. The number of nervous disorders among my patients has increased enormously——"

"What nonsense." He looked at me suspiciously with that telltale glassy stare. "I've seen more Willy Pan pictures than anybody in the country except my cabinet and members of Congress, yet I never felt better in my life."

"You mean you've seen releases not shown to the public?" A great light was dawning in my mind.

"Why, yes. Dr. David Jamieson, the creator of Willy Pan, has been kind enough to make up some cartoons which are shown only for the amusement of government officials. We find such shows take our minds off our troubles. They deal very cleverly with our problems down here, too."

"Did they suggest the taking over of public utilities and the universal conscription idea?" I asked guilelessly.

"Well, they did crystallize our ideas somewhat." He laughed. "Of course, we've known for a long time the necessity for making the United States self-sufficient and of obtaining new markets for our surplus products in South America and elsewhere, but——"

He stopped and looked at me doubtfully as if he had gone too far. "—but I don't know why I'm discussing government affairs with you, Dr. Brown. I understood that your visit had something to do with spreading the cheerful philosophies of Willy Pan, but I'm afraid you're no friend of his——"

I made some silly suggestion about reducing the cartoons to sixteen millimeter size and distributing them in the home. Then, as his suspicions seemed allayed, I asked my last question:

"Willy has suggested sharing the nation's wealth among the people. Is that on the Congressional program?"

"Oh, that will come later, much later, after we have consolidated our position as the greatest world power." He smiled as he bowed me out.

I returned to New York tired and depressed. Some sinister influence was at work setting up a veiled dictatorship in the United States. I could no longer doubt that. But was it this mysterious Dr. Jamieson or some one behind him? I did not know and there seemed no way of finding out. Plainly, the government had fallen unsuspectingly under the spell, for its nationalist tactics in the last few weeks had been entirely different from its previous policy.

The morning papers again confirmed my worst fears.

EUROPE PROTESTS AMERICAN EXPANSION IN SOUTH AMERICA

ENGLAND PROTESTS DEPORTATION OF HER NATIONALS  
U. S. WARSHIPS QUELL UPRISING IN BRAZIL

WESTERN HEMISPHERE MUST BELONG TO U. S., SAYS PRESIDENT

Such were a few of the headlines.

When Miss Hawkins arrived for work I called her into the consulting room and, under the pretext of treating her growing nervousness, tried every device I knew to break the hypnotic spell under which she labored. After several hours I gave it up as useless. Electric shocks, loud noises, argument, even a slap in the face brought no result. Her pupillary reflexes remained suspended; her other reflexes were dormant. And whenever I let her talk she reverted immediately to the topic of Willy Pan.

In despair I sent her away and paced the room until noon. If only there were somebody not under the influence of the spell to whom I could turn for help—some enemy of Dr. Jamieson—some rival——With a whoop I grabbed my hat and dashed out of the office as though the devil pursued me.

Half an hour later found me in the palatial offices of the Mammoth Film Cartoon Corporation. The place was strangely quiet. Nobody sat at the reception desk, so I marched boldly inside and sought among the maze of empty offices until I found one marked "President."

"Come in," a tired voice responded to my knock.

Inside I found a florid, perspiring individual who looked as if he had just been engaged in tearing his hair.

"I'm Dr. Brown, a psychiatrist, and I've come to ask you what you know about Willy Pan and his creator," I began without preamble.

"I suppose you've come to induce me to attend a showing of one of those cursed pictures," screamed the executive. "Well, I tell you I won't go. See? I can make better cartoons with one hand tied behind me than that faker Jamieson can. Yes, I know all the theaters have stopped showing my pictures and replaced them with Willy Pan. And I know that my entire staff has gone to work for Jamieson. That makes me the goat, but I'll never lick that phony doctor's boots. Not Felix Weinbrenner."

"You haven't seen any of Jamieson's films?" My heart leaped.

"Of course not. Do you think I have to steal my ideas from a mug who arrived in Hollywood with a medicine show. Pretends he was once a great physician. Phooey!"

"Now, now," I soothed. "Don't get excited. I want you to help me expose this Dr. Jamieson." I outlined the situation in detail as I saw it.

When I finished, the motion picture magnate slumped into a chair and stared at me, goggle-eyed.

"You don't say. You don't say," he mumbled over and over. "And we're

the only people not affected. Well, how can I help? Just give me a chance to get even with the crook who ruined my business."

"I want you to forge a Willy Pan cartoon," I answered.

"Me? Felix Weinbrenner stoop to imitation?" He popped up like a little balloon.

"So you can't do it?"

"Do it? I can do anything! But—but it will take me several weeks. Have to make thousands of drawings, you know, and all my assistants have left me." He stared at the empty offices.

"It's a matter of life and death for millions of people. Work night and day on it. Kill yourself if necessary. I'll help wherever I can and tell you just what I want done."

"O. K., Dr. Brown. Anything you say, just so it will make me even with Jamieson. I'll send over to the exchange for some old Willy Pan reels. Maybe we can use some clips from them and save time."

For a fortnight we worked like dogs on the pictorial forgery with which we hoped to reverse Willy Pan's deviltry. I was amazed at the infinite detail required to produce one short cartoon. There was an almost endless sequence of tinted sketches to be made, it seemed, each so similar to the next that only an expert could detect the difference. Then there was the problem of perspective, plus other technical quirks without number.

I learned somehow to do a lot of the detail work and when more help was needed I even impressed Miss Hawkins into service. I told her only that we had been employed to aid in the production of Willy Pan cartoons, gave her entirely disconnected duties so that she would not know what was going on, and whenever possible escorted her to and from work so that she would have no chance to betray our secret.

At last we got the silent print together somehow. It was not perfect but Weinbrenner had done marvels and he assured me that only an expert eye could detect the forgery.

Then the problem of superimposing Willy's seductive voice upon the film overwhelmed me.

"What are you going to do about that?" I asked my fellow conspirator. "Where can you find a voice double?"

"Don't need to." He smiled with the conceit of superior knowledge. "I'll just pick up the voice from the old reels we have, record the words separately and rearrange them to follow your dialogue and fit the lip movements on the screen. It will be plenty difficult, but not impossible."

We worked all night on the re-recording and the next morning saw the job completed, even to my satisfaction.

The task had been finished not a minute too soon, the newspapers showed us. They related that Congress had delegated all of its powers to the President and gone home; that the entire population of the country was now garbed in green khaki uniforms; that the fleets of Europe were converging

on our shores to stop America's expansion and that the whole country had been regimented on a war-time basis.

"Boy, you'd better get this film down to Washington right away." Weinbrenner had been reading over my shoulder. He was as disheveled and hollow-eyed from lack of sleep as I was, but his confidence was unshaken. It braced my waning courage.

"We'll have to try it out first to see whether it works."

"Nonsense. Anything I put my hand to just naturally has to work. And you haven't a second to lose."

I shook my head stubbornly, then as Miss Hawkins appeared at the doorway I suggested: "Let's try it on her."

"All right," he answered grudgingly. "I'll run the projector."

I ushered the unsuspecting girl into the stuffy little projection room and waited for Weinbrenner to start the reel. The lights clicked off and the title flashed on the screen to the accompaniment of the familiar "Moonlight Sonata" theme.

WILLY PAN  
IN  
THE PILGRIM  
Produced by  
AMERICAN STUDIOS, INC.  
Copyright 1953

"How cute he looks," gurgled the nurse as Willy stepped into the picture. He was dressed in the cassock of a penitent, with a long pilgrim's staff in his hand.

"Shhh!" I whispered. "Watch carefully."

For the first few minutes of the picture the little satyr's antics were performed in a hilarious fashion worthy of Jamieson at his best. Then, as the staff twinkled and whirled and the shadows began coiling over the screen, I felt the old pleasant lethargy stealing over me. It was only by a desperate exertion of will power that I kept from falling under the influence of the spell I had woven.

Leaning over, I pinched Miss Hawkins on the arm. She continued staring straight ahead, unaware of the pain. She was completely hypnotized! So far, so good.

Willy's face increased in size as it approached us until its enormous eyes seemed only a few feet away. Then it faded from the screen to allow the crawling shadows full play there. But the slumberous voice still filled the room.

"My friends," it murmured, "you are asleep, but you still hear my voice. Willy has been wrong in putting you to sleep. He realizes now that he told you to do things which are not right. Willy is going to change all that. Willy tells you to awake now and forget all that he has told you in the past. Willy

wants you to live your own lives, doing the best you can without his help. Willy tells you to awake and forget. Willy tells you to awake. Willy tells you to forget——”

The voice faded away as the lights went up and the dreamy strains of the “Moonlight Sonata” filled the room.

I looked at my companion and held my breath.

Miss Hawkins was, in fact, rubbing her eyes as though rousing from deep slumber. At last she turned and looked at me. Her eyes widened with astonishment.

“Why, Dr. Brown!” she cried. “When did you get back? I thought you were in Canada. And where on earth are we? Is this a theater? But where is the audience? Have I been asleep?”

She jumped up, blushing in confusion.

“We’ve just seen a Willy Pan cartoon,” I told her.

“Willy Pan?” She frowned. “Oh, that’s the new picture. I remember now. I came to the theater to see it. But surely this isn’t the theater——” She looked at me with charming helplessness.

As gently as possible I explained the situation and related all that had happened in the last two months. At first she would not believe me. Her mind was a blank for the entire period. But she was no fool and when I brought Weinbrenner in to corroborate my story and showed her the dates on the morning papers she struggled no longer.

“And you say everybody in the United States is under the spell?” she gasped. “How dreadful. And those headlines! Another war coming. Oh, what can we do to stop it?”

I told her of the forged film she had just seen and of our plan to take it to Washington.

“I’ll go with you,” she said firmly, her blue eyes flashing. “If there’s only three sane people in the country, we’ll have to stick together.”

“But there may be trouble—spies and——”

“I don’t care. I won’t be left alone in this town with a lot of crazy sleep-walkers.”

“All right,” I answered grimly. “Get your coat and hat. You, too, Weinbrenner. We’re catching the next plane.”

The Capitol had changed vastly since my first visit. An army was parading down Pennsylvania Avenue. Airplanes thundered overhead. Newsboys shouted war extras. “America for Americans,” screamed banners hung across the street. And everywhere the green uniforms of the populace were in evidence.

I called the White House for an appointment.

“I represent Dr. Jameison,” I explained to the same undersecretary to whom I had talked before. “I have a new Willy Pan release for private showing to the President and his cabinet.”

“That’s fine,” came the answer. “Bring it right over.”

Something in the suavity of that reply frightened me. It was too easy!

I dropped the receiver, grabbed my hat and dashed out of the hotel room, shouting for Miss Hawkins and Weinbrenner to follow me. What a fool I had been! At least I might have had sense enough to use a drug-store booth, where the call could not be traced so easily.

We had only reached the lobby when a group of secret service men surrounded us.

"Dr. Matthew Brown, Felix Weinbrenner and Mary Hawkins. You are under arrest for high treason, charged with attempting to forge a *Willy Pan* cartoon," said one, displaying his badge. "We have had spies watching you for weeks. You walked right into the trap."

I will not go into detail regarding our trial. What is the use? The glassy-eyed court-martial judges found us guilty as charged. The prosecution asked for the death penalty. Our attorney pleaded insanity—— He was a good attorney.

I am writing this in my padded cell in Matteawan. I can hear Weinbrenner cursing in the adjoining room. He is cracking up under the strain, poor fellow. Mary, brave little Mary Hawkins, is somewhere in the women's section. I have not seen her since the trial.

To-day they let me read the newspapers for the first time. The war has started and is being fought with ghastly, soulless ferocity. Thousands—tens of thousands killed already. My only hope is that a universal nervous breakdown of the American people will end the carnage.

Sometimes I wonder. Is it I who am insane? Is this all a madman's dream? But I must not think such thoughts. We three alone are sane in a world of madmen. We must not crack. Somehow we can escape and start again. Weinbrenner! Can you hear me, man? Don't scream like that. Take it easy!

Mary——

# *Through the Gates of the Silver Key*

*by H. P. Lovecraft and E. Hoffmann Price*

When this story first appeared, the editors described it as one which "for sheer imaginative daring goes beyond anything ever printed before." For *Weird Tales* that was saying a lot! The story behind its writing is interesting. You may have read Lovecraft's haunting tale *The Silver Key*, which was in *Avon Fantasy Reader* No. 8. E. Hoffmann Price, a weird author in his own right, had long been intrigued with the tale and had urged his friend Lovecraft to write a further episode. But Lovecraft put off so doing, until Price, inspired, sat down and wrote his own version of the adventure that the silver key opened upon. He sent this to Lovecraft, thereby forcing that author into action. Lovecraft proceeded to revise, "correct," and enlarge the Price manuscript, and so after a bit more work by both powerful imaginations the present striking novelette made its appearance.

## *J*

### CHAPTER 1

**N**A vast room hung with strangely figured arras and carpeted with Boukhara rugs of impressive age and workmanship, four men were sitting around a document-strewn table. From the far corners, where odd tripods of wrought iron were now and then replenished by an incredibly aged Negro in somber livery, came the hypnotic fumes of olibanum; while in a deep niche on one side there ticked a curious, coffin-shaped clock whose dial bore baffling hieroglyphs and whose four hands did not move in consonance with any time system known on this planet. It was a singular and disturbing room, but well fitted to the business then at hand. For there, in the New Orleans home of this continent's greatest mystic, mathematician and orientalist, there was being settled at last the estate of a scarcely less great mystic, scholar, author and dreamer who had vanished from the face of the earth four years before.

Randolph Carter, who had all his life sought to escape from the tedium and limitations of waking reality in the beckoning vistas of dreams and fabled avenues of other dimensions, disappeared from the sight of man on the seventh of October, 1928, at the age of fifty-four. His career had been a strange and lonely one, and there were those who inferred from his curious

novels many episodes more bizarre than any in his recorded history. His association with Harley Warren, the South Carolina mystic whose studies in the primal Naacal language of the Himalayan priests had led to such outrageous conclusions, had been close. Indeed, it was he who—one mist-mad, terrible night in an ancient graveyard—had seen Warren descend into a dank and nitrous vault, never to emerge. Carter lived in Boston, but it was from the wild, haunted hills behind hoary and witch-accursed Arkham that all his forebears had come. And it was amid these ancient, cryptically brooding hills that he had ultimately vanished.

His old servant, Parks—who died early in 1930—had spoken of the strangely aromatic and hideously carven box he had found in the attic, and of the undecipherable parchments and queerly figured silver key which that box had contained: matters of which Carter had also written to others. Carter, he said, had told him that this key had come down from his ancestors, and that it would help him to unlock the gates to his lost boyhood, and to strange dimensions and fantastic realms which he had hitherto visited only in vague, brief and elusive dreams. Then one day Carter took the box and its contents and rode away in his car, never to return.

Later on, people found the car at the side of an old, grass-grown road in the hills behind crumbling Arkham—the hills where Carter's forebears had once dwelt, and where the ruined cellar of the great Carter homestead still gaped to the sky. It was in a grove of tall elms near by that another of the Carters had mysteriously vanished in 1781, and not far away was the half-rotted cottage where Goody Fowler, the witch, had brewed her ominous potions still earlier. The region had been settled in 1692 by fugitives from the witchcraft trials in Salem, and even now it bore a name for vaguely ominous things scarcely to be envisaged. Edmund Carter had fled from the shadow of Gallows Hill just in time, and the tales of his sorceries were many. Now, it seemed, his lone descendant had gone somewhere to join him!

In the car they found the hideously carved box of fragrant wood, and the parchment which no man could read. The silver key was gone—presumably with Carter. Further than that there was no certain clue. Detectives from Boston said that the fallen timbers of the old Carter place seemed oddly disturbed, and somebody found a handkerchief on the rock-ridged, sinisterly wooded slope behind the ruins near the dreaded cave called the Snake Den.

It was then that the country legends about the Snake Den gained a new vitality. Farmers whispered of the blasphemous uses to which old Edmund Carter the wizard had put that horrible grotto, and added later tales about the fondness which Randolph Carter himself had had for it when a boy. In Carter's boyhood the venerable gambrel-roofed homestead was still standing and tenanted by his great-uncle Christopher. He had visited there often, and had talked singularly about the Snake Den. People remembered what he had said about a deep fissure and an unknown inner cave beyond, and speculated on the change he had shown after spending one whole memorable day in the cavern when he was nine. That was in October, too—and ever after

that he had seemed to have an uncanny knack at prophesying future events.

It had rained late in the night that Carter vanished, and no one was quite able to trace his footprints from the car. Inside the Snake Den all was amorphous liquid mud, owing to the copious seepage. Only the ignorant rustics whispered about the prints they thought they spied where the great elms overhang the road, and on the sinister hillside near the Snake Den, where the handkerchief was found. Who could pay attention to whispers that spoke of stubby little tracks like those which Randolph Carter's square-toed boots made when he was a small boy? It was as crazy a notion as that other whisper—that the tracks of old Benijah Corey's peculiar heelless boots, had met the stubby little tracks in the road. Old Benijah had been the Carters' hired man when Randolph was young; but he had died thirty years ago.

It must have been these whispers—plus Carter's own statement to Parks and others that the queerly arabesqued silver key would help him unlock the gates of his lost boyhood—which caused a number of mystical students to declare that the missing man had actually doubled back on the trail of time and returned through forty-five years to that other October day in 1883 when he had stayed in the Snake Den as a small boy. When he came out that night, they argued, he had somehow made the whole trip to 1928 and back; for did he not thereafter know of things which were to happen later? And yet he had never spoken of anything to happen after 1928.

One student—an elderly eccentric of Providence, Rhode Island, who had enjoyed a long and close correspondence with Carter—had a still more elaborate theory, and believed that Carter had not only returned to boyhood, but achieved a further liberation, roving at will through the prismatic vistas of boyhood dream. After a strange vision this man published a tale of Carter's vanishing in which he hinted that the lost one now reigned as king on the opal throne of Illek-Vad, that fabulous town of turrets atop the hollow cliffs of glass overlooking the twilight sea wherein the bearded and finny Gnorri build their singular labyrinths.

It was this old man, Ward Phillips, who pleaded most loudly against the apportionment of Carter's estate to his heirs—all distant cousins—on the ground that he was still alive in another time-dimension and might well return some day. Against him was arrayed the legal talent of one of the cousins, Ernest K. Aspinwall of Chicago, a man ten years Carter's senior, but keen as a youth in forensic battles. For four years the contest had raged, but now the time for apportionment had come, and this vast, strange room in New Orleans was to be the scene of the arrangements.

It was the home of Carter's literary and financial executor—the distinguished Creole student of mysteries and Eastern antiquities, Etienne-Laurant de Marigny. Carter had met de Marigny during the war, when they both served in the French Foreign Legion, and had at once cleaved to him because of their similar tastes and outlook. When, on a memorable joint furlough, the learned young Creole had taken the wistful Boston dreamer to Bayonne,

in the south of France, and had shown him certain terrible secrets in the nighted and immemorial crypts that burrow beneath that brooding, eon-weighted city, the friendship was for ever sealed. Carter's will had named de Marigny as executor, and now that avid scholar was reluctantly presiding over the settlement of the estate. It was sad work for him, for like the old Rhode Islander he did not believe that Carter was dead. But what weight have the dreams of mystics against the harsh wisdom of the world?

Around the table in that strange room in the old French Quarter sat the men who claimed an interest in the proceedings. There had been the usual legal advertisements of the conference in papers wherever Carter's heirs were thought to live: yet only four now sat listening to the abnormal ticking of that coffin-shaped clock which told no earthly time, and to the bubbling of the courtyard fountain beyond half-curtained, fan-lighted windows. As the hours wore on, the faces of the four were half shrouded in the curling fumes from the tripods, which, piled recklessly with fuel, seemed to need less and less attention from the silently gliding and increasingly nervous old Negro.

There was Etienne de Marigny himself—slim, dark, handsome, mustached, and still young. Aspinwall, representing the heirs, was white-haired, apoplectic-faced, side-whiskered, and portly. Phillips, the Providence mystic, was lean, gray, long-nosed, clean-shaven, and stoop-shouldered. The fourth man was non-committal in age—lean, with a dark, bearded, singularly immobile face of very regular contour, bound with the turban of a high-caste Brahman and having night-black, burning, almost irisless eyes which seemed to gaze out from a vast distance behind the features. He had announced himself as the Swami Chandraputra, an adept from Benares, with important information to give; and both de Marigny and Phillips—who had corresponded with him—had been quick to recognize the genuineness of his mystical pretensions. His speech had an oddly forced, hollow, metallic quality, as if the use of English taxed his vocal apparatus; yet his language was as easy, correct and idiomatic as any native Anglo-Saxon's. In general attire he was the normal European civilian, but his loose clothes sat peculiarly badly on him, while his bushy black beard, Eastern turban, and large, white mittens gave him an air of exotic eccentricity.

De Marigny, fingering the parchment found in Carter's cat, was speaking.

"No, I have not been able to make anything of the parchment. Mr. Phillips, here, also gives it up. Colonel Churchward declares it is not Naacal, and it looks nothing at all like the heiroglyphics on that Easter Island war-club. The carvings on that box, though, do strongly suggest Easter Island images. The nearest thing I can recall to these parchment characters—notice how all the letters seem to hang down from horizontal word-bars—is the writing in a book poor Harley Warren once had. It came from India while Carter and I were visiting him in 1919, and he never would tell us anything about it—said it would be better if we didn't know, and hinted that it might have come originally from some place other than the Earth. He took it with him in De-

cember, when he went down into the vault in that old graveyard—but neither he nor the book ever came to the surface again. Some time ago I sent our friend here—the Swami Chandraputra—a memory-sketch of some of those letters, and also a photostatic copy of the Carter parchment. He believes he may be able to shed light on them after certain references and consultations.

"But the key—Carter sent me a photograph of that. Its curious arabesques were not letters, but seem to have belonged to the same culture-tradition as the parchment. Carter always spoke of being on the point of solving the mystery, though he never gave details. Once he grew almost poetic about the whole business. That antique silver key, he said, would unlock the successive doors that bar our free march down the mighty corridors of space and time to the very Border which no man has crossed since Shaddad with his terrific genius built and concealed in the sands of Arabia Petraea the prodigious domes and uncounted minarets of thousand-pillared Irem. Half-starved dervishes—wrote Carter—and thirst-crazed nomads have returned to tell of that monumental portal, and of the hand that is sculptured above the key-stone of the arch, but no man has passed and retraced his steps to say that his footprints on the garnet-strewn sands within bear witness to his visit. The key, he surmised, was that for which the cyclopean sculptured hand vainly grasps.

"Why Carter didn't take the parchment as well as the key, we can not say. Perhaps he forgot it—or perhaps he forbore to take it through recollection of one who had taken a book of like characters into a vault and never returned. Or perhaps it was really immaterial to what he wished to do."

As de Marigny paused, old Mr. Phillips spoke a harsh, shrill voice.

"We can know of Randolph Carter's wandering only what we dream. I have been to many strange places in dreams, and have heard many strange and significant things in Ulthar, beyond the River Skai. It does not appear that the parchment was needed, for certainly Carter reentered the world of his boyhood dreams, and is now a king in Hek-Vad."

Mr. Aspinwall grew doubly apoplectic-looking as he sputtered: "Can't somebody shut that old fool up? We've had enough of these moonings. The problem is to divide the property, and it's about time we got to it."

For the first time Swami Chandraputra spoke in his queerly alien voice.

"Gentlemen, there is more to this matter than you think. Mr. Aspinwall does not do well to laugh at the evidence of dreams. Mr. Phillips has taken an incomplete view—perhaps because he has not dreamed enough. I, myself, have done much dreaming. We in India have always done that, just as all the Carters seem to have done it. You, Mr. Aspinwall, as a maternal cousin, are naturally not a Carter. My own dreams, and certain other sources of information, have told me a great deal which you still find obscure. For example, Randolph Carter forgot that parchment which he couldn't decipher—yet it would have been well for him had he remembered to take it. You see, I have really learned pretty much what happened to Carter after he left

his car with the silver key at sunset on that seventh of October, four years ago."

Aspinwall audibly sneered, but the others sat up with heightened interest. The smoke from the tripods increased, and the crazy ticking of that coffin-shaped clock seemed to fall into bizarre patterns like the dots and dashes of some alien and insoluble telegraph message from outer space. The Hindoo leaned back, half closed his eyes, and continued in that oddly labored yet idiomatic speech, while before his audience there began to float a picture of what had happened to Randolph Carter.

## CHAPTER 2

The hills beyond Arkham are full of a strange magic—something, perhaps, which the old wizard Edmund Carter called down from the stars and up from the crypts of nether earth when he fled there from Salem in 1692. As soon as Randolph Carter was back among them he knew that he was close to one of the gates which a few audacious, abhorred and alien-souled men have blasted through titan walls betwixt the world and the outside absolute. Here, he felt, and on this day of the year, he could carry out with success the message he had deciphered months before from the arabesques of that tarnished and incredibly ancient silver key. He knew now how it must be rotated, and how it must be held up to the setting sun, and what syllables of ceremony must be intoned into the void at the ninth and last turning. In a spot as close to a dark polarity and induced gate as this, it could not fail in its primary functions. Certainly, he would rest that night in the lost boyhood for which he had never ceased to mourn.

He got out of the car with the key in his pocket, walking up-hill deeper and deeper into the shadowy core of that brooding, haunted countryside of winding road, vine-grown stone wall, black woodland, gnarled, neglected orchard, gaping-windowed, deserted farmhouse, and nameless ruin. At the sunset hour, when the distant spires of Kingsport gleamed in the ruddy blaze, he took out the key and made the needed turnings and intonations. Only later did he realize how soon the ritual had taken effect.

Then in the deepening twilight he had heard a voice out of the past: Old Benijah Corey, his great-uncle's hired man. Had not old Benijah been dead for thirty years? Thirty years before *when*? What was time? Where had he been? Why was it strange that Benijah should be calling him on this seventh of October, 1883? Was he not out later than Aunt Martha had told him to stay? What was this key in his blouse pocket, where his little telescope—given him by his father on his ninth birthday, two months before—ought to be? Had he found it in the attic at home? Would it unlock the mystic pylon which his sharp eye had traced amidst the jagged rocks at the back of that inner cave behind the Snake Den on the hill? That was the place they always coupled with old Edmund Carter the wizard. People wouldn't go there, and nobody but him had ever noticed or squirmed through the root-choked

fissure to that great black inner chamber with the pylon. Whose hands had carved that hint of a pylon out of the living rock? Old Wizard Edmund's—or *others* that he had conjured up and commanded?

That evening little Randolph ate supper with Uncle Chris and Aunt Martha in the old gambrel-roofed farmhouse.

Next morning he was up early and out through the twisted-boughed apple orchard to the upper timber-lot where the mouth of the Snake Den lurked black and forbidding amongst grotesque, overnourished oaks. A nameless expectancy was upon him, and he did not even notice the loss of his hand-kerchief as he fumbled in his blouse pocket to see if the queer silver key was safe. He crawled through the dark orifice with tense, adventurous assurance, lighting his way with matches taken from the sitting-room. In another moment he had wriggled through the root-choked fissure at the farther end, and was in the vast, unknown inner grotto whose ultimate rock wall seemed half like a monstrous and consciously shapen pylon. Before that dank, dripping wall he stood silent and awestruck, lighting one match after another as he gazed. Was that stony bulge above the keystone of the imagined arch really a gigantic sculptured hand? Then he drew forth the silver key, and made motions and intonations whose source he could only dimly remember. Was anything forgotten? He knew only that he wished to cross the barrier to the untrammeled land of his dreams and the gulfs where all dimensions dissolved in the absolute.

### CHAPTER 3

What happened then is scarcely to be described in words. It is full of those paradoxes, contradictions and anomalies which have no place in waking life, but which fill our more fantastic dreams and are taken as matters of course till we return to our narrow, rigid, objective world of limited causation and tri-dimensional logic. As the Hindoo continued his tale, he had difficulty in avoiding what seemed—even more than the notion of a man transferred through the years to boyhood—an air of trivial, puerile extravagance. Mr. Aspinwall, in disgust, gave an apoplectic snort and virtually stopped listening.

For the rite of the silver key, as practiced by Randolph Carter in that black, haunted cave within a cave, did not prove unavailing. From the first gesture and syllable an aura of strange, awesome mutation was apparent—a sense of incalculable disturbance and confusion in time and space, yet one which held no hint of what we recognize as motion and duration. Imperceptibly, such things as age and location ceased to have any significance whatever. The day before, Randolph Carter had miraculously leaped a gulf of years. Now there was no distinction between boy and man. There was only the entity Randolph Carter, with a certain store of images which had lost all connection with terrestrial scenes and circumstances of acquisition. A moment before, there had been an inner cave with vague suggestions of a monstrous

arch and gigantic sculptured hand on the farther wall. Now there was neither cave nor absence of cave; neither wall nor absence of wall. There was only a flux of impressions not so much visual as cerebral, amidst which the entity that was Randolph Carter experienced perceptions or registrations of all that his mind revolved on, yet without any clear consciousness of the way in which he received them.

By the time the rite was over, Carter knew that he was in no region whose place could be told by Earth's geographers, and in no age whose date history could fix; for the nature of what was happening was not wholly unfamiliar to him. There were hints of it in the cryptical Pnakotic fragments, and a whole chapter in the forbidden *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred, had taken on significance when he had deciphered the designs graven on the silver key. A gate had been unlocked—not, indeed, the Ultimate Gate, but one leading from Earth and time to that extension of Earth which is outside time, and from which in turn the Ultimate Gate leads fear-somely and perilously to the Last Void which is outside all earths, all universes, and all matter.

There would be a Guide—and a very terrible one; a Guide who had been an entity of Earth millions of years before, when man was undreamed of, and when forgotten shapes moved on a steaming planet building strange cities among whose last, crumbling ruins the first mammals were to play. Carter remembered what the monstrous *Necronomicon* had vaguely and disconcertingly adumbrated concerning that Guide:

*"And while there are those,"* the mad Arab had written, *"who have dared to seek glimpses beyond the Veil, and to accept HIM as guide, they would have been more prudent had they avoided commerce with HIM; for it is written in the Book of Thoth how terrific is the price of a single glimpse. Nor may those who pass ever return, for in the vastnesses transcending our world are shapes of darkness that seize and bind. The Affair that shambleth about in the night, the evil that defieth the Elder Sign, the Herd that stand watch at the secret portal each tomb is known to have, and that thrive on that which groweth out of the tenants thereof—all these Blacknesses are lesser than HE WHO guardeth the Gateway: HE WHO will guide the rash one beyond all the worlds into the Abyss of unnamable devourers. For He is 'UMR AT-TAWIL, the Most Ancient One, which the scribe rendereth as THE PROLONGED OF LIFE."*

Memory and imagination shaped dim half-pictures with uncertain outlines amidst the seething chaos, but Carter knew that they were of memory and imagination only. Yet he felt that it was not chance which built these things in his consciousness, but rather some vast reality, ineffable and undimensioned, which surrounded him and strove to translate itself into the only symbols he was capable of grasping. For no mind of Earth may grasp the extensions of shape which interweave in the oblique gulfs outside time and the dimensions we know.

There floated before Carter a cloudy pageantry of shapes and scenes which

he somehow linked with Earth's primal, eon-forgotten past. Monstrous living things moved deliberately through vistas of fantastic handiwork that no sane dream ever held, and landscapes bore incredible vegetation and cliffs and mountains and masonry of no human pattern. There were cities under the sea, and denizens thereof; and towers in great deserts where globes and cylinders and nameless winged entities shot off into space, or hurtled down out of space. All this Carter grasped, though the images bore no fixed relation to one another or to him. He himself had no stable form or position, but only such shifting hints of form and position as his whirling fancy supplied.

He had wished to find the enchanted regions of his boyhood dreams, where galleys sail up the river Oukranos past the gilded spires of Thran, and elephant caravans tramp through perfumed jungles in Kled, beyond forgotten palaces with veined ivory columns that sleep lovely and unbroken under the moon. Now, intoxicated with wider visions, he scarcely knew what he sought. Thoughts of infinite and blasphemous daring rose in his mind, and he knew he would face the dreaded Guide without fear, asking monstrous and terrible things of him.

All at once the pageant of impressions seemed to achieve a vague kind of stabilization. There were great masses of towering stone, carven into alien and incomprehensible designs and disposed according to the laws of some unknown, inverse geometry. Light filtered down from a sky of no assignable color in baffling, contradictory directions, and played almost sentiently over what seemed to be a curved line of gigantic hieroglyphed pedestals more hexagonal than otherwise, and surmounted by cloaked, ill-defined shapes.

There was another shape, too, which occupied no pedestal, but which seemed to glide or float over the cloudy, floor-like lower level. It was not exactly permanent in outline, but held transient suggestions of something remotely preceding or paralleling the human form, though half as large again as an ordinary man. It seemed to be heavily cloaked, like the shapes on the pedestals, with some neutral-colored fabric; and Carter could not detect any eye-holes through which it might gaze. Probably it did not need to gaze, for it seemed to belong to an order of beings far outside the merely physical in organization and faculties.

A moment later Carter knew that this was so, for the Shape had spoken to his mind without sound or language. And though the name it uttered was a dreaded and terrible one, Randolph Carter did not flinch in fear. Instead, he spoke back, equally without sound or language, and made those obeisances which the hideous *Necronomicon* had taught him to make. For this shape was nothing less than that which all the world has feared since Lomar rose out of the sea, and the Children of the Fire Mist came to Earth to teach the Elder Lore to man. It was indeed the frightful Guide and Guardian of the Gate—'UMR AT-TAWIL, the ancient one, which the scribe rendereth the PRO-LONGED OF LIFE.

The Guide knew, as he knew all things, of Carter's quest and coming, and

that this seeker of dreams and secrets stood before him unafraid. There was no horror or malignity in what he radiated, and Carter wondered for a moment whether the mad Arab's terrific blasphemous hints came from envy and a baffled wish to do what was now about to be done. Or perhaps the Guide reserved his horror and malignity for those who feared. As the radiations continued, Carter eventually interpreted them in the form of words.

"I am indeed that Most Ancient One," said the Guide, "of whom you know. We have awaited you—the Ancient Ones and I. You are welcome, even though long delayed. You have the key, and have unlocked the First Gate. Now the Ultimate Gate is ready for your trial. If you fear, you need not advance. You may still go back unharmed, the way you came. But if you choose to advance—"

The pause was ominous, but the radiations continued to be friendly. Carter hesitated not a moment, for a burning curiosity drove him on.

"I will advance," he radiated back, "and I accept you as my Guide."

At this reply the Guide seemed to make a sign by certain motions of his robe which may or may not have involved the lifting of an arm or some homologous member. A second sign followed, and from his well-learned lore Carter knew that he was at last very close to the Ultimate Gate. The light now changed to another inexplicable color, and the shapes on the quasi-hexagonal pedestals became more clearly defined. As they sat more erect, their outlines became more like those of men, though Carter knew that they could not be men. Upon their cloaked heads there now seemed to rest tall, uncertainly colored miters, strangely suggestive of those on certain nameless figures chiselled by a forgotten sculptor along the living cliffs of a high, forbidden mountain in Tartary; while grasped in certain folds of their swathings were long scepters whose carven heads boded forth a grotesque and archaic mystery.

Carter guessed what they were and whence they came, and Whom they served; and guessed, too, the price of their service. But he was still content, for at one mighty venture he was to learn all. Damnation, he reflected, is but a word bandied about by those whose blindness leads them to condemn all who can see, even with a single eye. He wondered at the vast conceit of those who had babbled of the *malignant* Ancient Ones, as if They could pause from their everlasting dreams to wreak a wrath on mankind. As well, he thought, might a mammoth pause to visit frantic vengeance on an angle-worm. Now the whole assemblage on the vaguely hexagonal pillars was greeting him with a gesture of those oddly carven scepters and radiating a message which he understood:

"We salute you, Most Ancient One, and you, Randolph Carter, whose daring has made you one of us."

Carter saw now that one of the pedestals was vacant, and a gesture of the Most Ancient One told him it was reserved for him. He saw also another pedestal, taller than the rest, and at the center of the oddly curved line—

neither semicircle nor ellipse, parabola nor hyperbola—which they formed. This, he guessed, was the Guide's own throne. Moving and rising in a manner hardly definable, Carter took his seat; and as he did so he saw that the Guide had seated himself.

Gradually and mistily it became apparent that the Most Ancient One was holding something—some object clutched in the outflung folds of his robe as if for the sight, or what answered for sight, of the cloaked Companions. It was a large sphere, or apparent sphere, of some obscurely iridescent metal, and as the Guide put it forward a low, pervasive half-impression of *sound* began to rise and fall in intervals which seemed to be rhythmic even though they followed no rhythm of Earth. There was a suggestion of chanting—or what human imagination might interpret as chanting. Presently the quasi-sphere began to grow luminous, and as it gleamed up into a cold, pulsating light of unassignable color, Carter saw that its flickerings conformed to the alien rhythm of the chant. Then all the mitered, scepter-bearing Shapes on the pedestals commenced a slight, curious swaying in the same inexplicable rhythm, while nimbususes of unclassifiable light—resembling that of the quasi-sphere—played around their shrouded heads.

The Hindoo paused in his tale and looked curiously at the tall, coffin-shaped clock with the four hands and hieroglyphed dial, whose crazy ticking followed no known rhythm of Earth.

"You, Mr. de Marigny," he suddenly said to his learned host, "do not need to be told the particularly alien rhythm to which those cowled Shapes on the hexagonal pillars chanted and nodded. You are the only one else—in America—who has had a taste of the Outer Extension. That clock—I suppose it was sent you by the Yogi poor Harley Warren used to talk about—the seer who said that he alone of living men had been to Yian-Ho, the hidden legacy of eon-old Leng, and had borne certain things away from that dreadful and forbidden city. I wonder how many of its subtler properties you know? If my dreams and readings be correct, it was made by those who knew much of the First Gateway. But let me go on with my tale."

At last, continued the Swami, the swaying and the suggestion of chanting ceased, the lambent nimbususes around the now drooping and motionless heads faded, while the cloaked shapes slumped curiously on their pedestals. The quasi-sphere, however, continued to pulsate with inexplicable light. Carter felt that the Ancient Ones were sleeping as they had been when he first saw them, and he wondered out of what cosmic dreams his coming had aroused them. Slowly there filtered into his mind the truth that this strange chanting ritual had been one of instruction, and that the Companions had been chanted by the Most Ancient One into a new and peculiar kind of sleep in order that their dreams might open the Ultimate Gate to which the silver key was a passport. He knew that in the profundity of this deep sleep they were contemplating unplumbed vastnesses of utter and absolute outsideness, and that they were to accomplish that which his presence had demanded.

The Guide did not share this sleep, but seemed still to be giving instructions in some subtle, soundless way. Evidently he was implanting images of those things which he wished the Companions to dream: and Carter knew that as each of the Ancient Ones pictured the prescribed thought, there would be born the nucleus of a manifestation visible to his earthly eyes. When the dreams of all the Shapes had achieved a oneness, that manifestation would occur, and everything he required be materialized, through concentration. He had seen such things on Earth—in India, where the combined, projected will of a circle of adepts can make a thought take tangible substance, and in hoary Atlaanit, of which few even dare speak.

Just what the Ultimate Gate was, and how it was to be passed, Carter could not be certain: but a feeling of tense expectancy surged over him. He was conscious of having a kind of body, and of holding the fateful silver key in his hand. The masses of towering stone opposite him seemed to possess the evenness of a wall, toward the center of which his eyes were irresistibly drawn. And then suddenly he felt the mental currents of the Most Ancient One cease to flow forth.

For the first time Carter realized how terrific utter silence, mental and physical, may be. The earlier moments had never failed to contain some perceptible rhythm, if only the faint, cryptical pulse of the Earth's dimensional extension, but now the hush of the abyss seemed to fall upon everything. Despite his intimations of body, he had no audible breath, and the glow of 'Umr at-Tawil's quasi-sphere had grown petrifiedly fixed and unpulsating. A potent nimbus, brighter than those which had played round the heads of the Shapes, blazed frozenly over the shrouded skull of the terrible Guide.

A dizziness assailed Carter, and his sense of lost orientation waxed a thousandfold. The strange lights seemed to hold the quality of the most impenetrable blacknesses heaped upon blacknesses, while about the Ancient Ones, so close on their pseudo-hexagonal thrones, there hovered an air of the most stupefying remoteness. Then he felt himself wafted into immeasurable depths, with waves of perfumed warmth lapping against his face. It was as if he floated in a torrid, rose-tintured sea; a sea of drugged wine whose waves broke foaming against shores of brazen fire. A great fear clutched him as he half saw that vast expanse of surging sea lapping against its far-off coast. But the moment of silence was broken—the surgings were speaking to him in a language that was not of physical sound or articulate words.

*"The Man of Truth is beyond good and evil," intoned a voice that was not a voice. "The Man of Truth has ridden to All-Is-One. The Man of Truth has learned that Illusion is the One Reality, and that Substance is the Great Impostor."*

And now, in that rise of masonry to which his eyes had been so irresistibly drawn, there appeared the outline of a titanic arch not unlike that which he thought he had glimpsed so long ago in that cave within a cave, on the far, unreal surface of the three-dimensional Earth. He realized that he had been using the silver key—moving it in accord with an unlearned and instinctive

ritual closely akin to that which had opened the Inner Gate. That rose-drunken sea which lapped his cheeks was, he realized, no more or less than the adamantine mass of the solid wall yielding before his spell, and the vortex of thought with which the Ancient Ones had aided his spell. Still guided by instinct and blind determination, he floated forward—and through the Ultimate Gate.

## CHAPTER 4

Randolph Carter's advance through that cyclopean bulk of masonry was like a dizzy precipitation through the measureless gulfs between the stars. From a great distance he felt triumphant, godlike surges of deadly sweetness, and after that the rustling of great wings, and impressions of sound like the chirpings and murmurings of objects unknown on Earth or in the solar system. Glancing backward, he saw not one gate alone, but a multiplicity of gates, at some of which clamored Forms he strove not to remember.

And then, suddenly, he felt a greater terror than that which any of the Forms could give—a terror from which he could not flee because it was connected with himself. Even the First Gateway had taken something of stability from him, leaving him uncertain about his bodily form and about his relationship to the mistily defined objects around him, but it had not disturbed his sense of unity. He had still been Randolph Carter, a fixed point in the dimensional seething. Now, beyond the Ultimate Gateway, he realized in a moment of consuming fright that he was not one person, but many persons.

He was in many places at the same time. On Earth, on October 7, 1883, a little boy named Randolph Carter was leaving the Snake Den in the hushed evening light and running down the rocky slope, and through the twisted-boughed orchard toward his Uncle Christopher's house in the hills beyond Arkham; yet at that same moment, which was also somehow in the earthly year of 1928, a vague shadow not less Randolph Carter was sitting on a pedestal among the Ancient Ones in Earth's transdimensional extension. Here, too, was a third Randolph Carter, in the unknown and formless cosmic abyss beyond the Ultimate Gate. And elsewhere, in a chaos of scenes whose infinite multiplicity and monstrous diversity brought him close to the brink of madness, were a limitless confusion of beings which he knew were as much himself as the local manifestation now beyond the Ultimate Gate.

There were Carters in settings belonging to every known and suspected age of Earth's history, and to remoter ages of earthly entity transcending knowledge, suspicion, and credibility; Carters of forms both human and non-human, vertebrate and invertebrate, conscious and mindless, animal and vegetable. And more, there were Carters having nothing in common with earthly life, but moving outrageously amidst backgrounds of other planets and systems and galaxies and cosmic continua; spores of eternal life drifting from world to world, universe to universe, yet all equally himself. Some of

the glimpses recalled dreams—both faint and vivid, single and persistent—which he had had through the long years since he first began to dream; and a few possessed a haunting, fascinating and almost horrible familiarity which no earthly logic could explain.

Faced with this realization, Randolph Carter reeled in the clutch of supreme horror—horror such as had not been hinted even at the climax of that hideous night when two had ventured into an ancient and abhorred necropolis under a waning moon and only one had emerged. No death, no doom, no anguish can arouse the surpassing despair which flows from a loss of *identity*. Merging with nothingness is peaceful oblivion; but to be aware of existence and yet to know that one is no longer a definite being distinguished from other beings—that one no longer has a *self*—that is the nameless summit of agony and dread.

He knew that there had been a Randolph Carter of Boston, yet could not be sure whether he—the fragment or facet of an entity beyond the Ultimate Gate—had been that one or some other. His *self* had been annihilated; and yet he—if indeed there could, in view of that utter nullity of individual existence, be such a thing as *he*—was equally aware of being in some inconceivable way a legion of selves. It was as though his body had been suddenly transformed into one of those many-limbed and many-headed effigies sculptured in Indian temples, and he contemplated the aggregation in a bewildered attempt to discern which was the original and which the additions—if indeed (supremely monstrous thought!) there *were* any original as distinguished from other embodiments.

Then, in the midst of these devastating reflections, Carter's beyond-the-gate fragment was hurled from what had seemed the nadir of horror to black, clutching pits of a horror still more profound. This time it was largely external—a force or personality which at once confronted and surrounded and pervaded him, and which in addition to its local presence, seemed also to be a part of himself, and likewise to be co-existent with all time and conterminous with all space. There was no visual image, yet the sense of entity and the awful concept of combined localism and identity and infinity lent a paralyzing terror beyond anything which any Carter-fragment had hitherto deemed capable of existing.

In the face of that awful wonder, the quasi-Carter forgot the horror of destroyed individuality. It was an All-in-One and One-in-All of limitless being and self—not merely a thing of one space-time continuum, but allied to the ultimate animating essence of existence's whole unbounded sweep—the last, utter sweep which has no confines and which outreaches fancy and mathematics alike. It was perhaps that which certain secret cults of Earth had whispered of as *Yog-Sothoth*, and which has been a deity under other names; that which the crustaceans of Yuggoth worship as the Beyond-One, and which the vaporous brains of the spiral nebulae know by an untranslatable sign—yet in a flash the Carter-facet realized how slight and fractional all these conceptions are.

And now the Being was addressing the Carter-facet in prodigious waves that smote and burned and thundered—a concentration of energy that blasted its recipient with well-nigh unendurable violence, and that paralleled in an unearthly rhythm the curious swaying of the Ancient Ones, and the flickering of the monstrous lights, in that baffling region beyond the First Gate. It was as though suns and worlds and universes had converged upon one point whose very position in space they had conspired to annihilate with an impact of resistless fury. But amidst the greater terror one lesser terror was diminished; for the searing waves appeared somehow to isolate the Beyond-the-Gate Carter from his infinity of duplicates—to restore, as it were, a certain amount of the illusion of identity. After a time the hearer began to translate the waves into speech-forms known to him, and his sense of horror and oppression waned. Fright became pure awe, and what had seemed blasphemously abormal seemed now only ineffably majestic.

"Randolph Carter," it seemed to say, "my manifestations on your planet's extension, the Ancient Ones, have sent you as one who would lately have returned to small lands of dream which he had lost, yet who with greater freedom has risen to greater and nobler desires and curiosities. You wished to sail up golden Oukranos, to search out forgotten ivory cities in orchid-heavy Kled, and to reign on the opal throne of Illek-Vad, whose fabulous towers and numberless domes rise mighty toward a single red star in a filament alien to your Earth and to all matter. Now, with the passing of two Gates, you wish loftier things. You would not flee like a child from a scene disliked to a dream beloved, but would plunge like a man into that last and inmost of secrets which lies behind all scenes and dreams.

"What you wish, I have found good, and I am ready to grant that which I have granted eleven times only to beings of your planet—five times only to those you call men, or those resembling them. I am ready to show you the Ultimate Mystery, to look on which is to blast a feeble spirit. Yet before you gaze full at that last and first of secrets you may still wield a free choice, and return if you will through the two Gates with the Veil still unrent before your eyes."

## CHAPTER 5

A sudden shutting-off of the waves left Carter in a chilling and awesome silence full of the spirit of desolation. On every hand pressed the illimitable vastness of the void; yet the seeker knew that the Being was still there. After a moment he thought of words whose mental substance he flung into the abyss: "I accept. I will not retreat."

The waves surged forth again, and Carter knew that the Being had heard. And now there poured from that limitless Mind a flood of knowledge and explanation which opened new vistas to the seeker, and prepared him for such a grasp of the cosmos as he had never hoped to possess. He was told how childish and limited is the notion of a tri-dimensional world, and what

an infinity of directions there are besides the known directions of up-down, forward-backward, right-left. He was shown the smallness and tinsel emptiness of the little Earth gods, with their petty, human interests and connections—their hatreds, rages, loves and vanities; their craving for praise and sacrifice, and their demands for faiths contrary to reason and nature.

While most of the impressions translated themselves to Carter as words, there were others to which other senses gave interpretation. Perhaps with eyes and perhaps with imagination he perceived that he was in a region of dimensions beyond those conceivable to the eye and brain of man. He saw now, in the brooding shadows of that which had been first a vortex of power and then an illimitable void, a sweep of creation that dizzied his senses. From some inconceivable vantage-point he looked upon prodigious forms whose multiple extensions transcended any conception of being, size and boundaries which his mind had hitherto been able to hold, despite a lifetime of cryptical study. He began to understand dimly why there could exist at the same time the little boy Randolph Carter in the Arkham farmhouse in 1883, the misty form on the vaguely hexagonal pillar beyond the First Gate, the fragment now facing the Presence in the limitless abyss, and all the other Carters his fancy or perception envisaged.

Then the waves increased in strength and sought to improve his understanding, reconciling him to the multiform entity of which his present fragment was an infinitesimal part. They told him that every figure of space is but the result of the intersection by a plane of some corresponding figure of one more dimension—as a square is cut from a cube, or a circle from a sphere. The cube and sphere, of three dimensions, are thus cut from corresponding forms of four dimensions, which men know only through guesses and dreams; and these in turn are cut from forms of five dimensions, and so on up to the dizzy and reachless heights of archetypal infinity. The world of men and of the gods of men is merely an infinitesimal phase of an infinitesimal thing—the three-dimensional phase of that small wholeness reached by the First Gate, where 'Umr at-Tawil dictates dreams to the Ancient Ones. Though men hail it as reality, and brand thoughts of its many-dimensioned original as unreality, it is in truth the very opposite. That which we call substance and reality is shadow and illusion, and that which we call shadow and illusion is substance and reality.

Time, the waves went on, is motionless, and without beginning or end. That it has motion and is the cause of change is an illusion. Indeed, it is itself really an illusion, for except to the narrow sight of beings in limited dimensions there are no such things as past, present and future. Men think of time only because of what they call change, yet that too is illusion. All that was, and is, and is to be, exists simultaneously.

These revelations came with a god-like solemnity which left Carter unable to doubt. Even though they lay almost beyond his comprehension, he felt that they must be true in the light of that final cosmic reality which belies all local perspectives and narrow partial views; and he was familiar enough

with profound speculations to be free from the bondage of local and partial conceptions. Had his whole quest not been based upon a faith in the unreality of the local and partial?

After an impressive pause the waves continued, saying that what the denizens of few-dimensional zones call change is merely a function of their consciousness, which views the external world from various cosmic angles. As the Shapes produced by the cutting of a cone seem to vary with the angles of cutting—being circle, ellipse, parabola or hyperbola according to that angle, yet without any change in the cone itself—so do the local aspects of an unchanged and endless reality seem to change with the cosmic angle of regarding. To this variety of angles of consciousness the feeble beings of the inner worlds are slaves, since with rare exceptions they can not learn to control them. Only a few students of forbidden things have gained inklings of this control, and have thereby conquered time and change. But the entities outside the Gates command all angles, and view the myriad parts of the cosmos in terms of fragmentary change-involving perspective, or of the changeless totality beyond perspective, in accordance with their will.

As the waves paused again, Carter began to comprehend, vaguely and terrifiedly, the ultimate background of that riddle of lost individuality which had at first so horrified him. His intuition pieced together the fragments of revelation, and brought him closer and closer to a grasp of the secret. He understood that much of the frightful revelation would have come upon him—splitting up his ego amongst myriads of earthly counterparts—inside the First Gate, had not the magic of 'Umr at-Tawil kept it from him in order that he might use the silver key with precision for the Ultimate Gate's opening. Anxious for clearer knowledge, he sent out waves of thought, asking more of the exact relationship between his various facets—the fragment now beyond the Ultimate Gate, the fragment still on the quasi-hexagonal pedestal beyond the First Gate, the boy of 1883, the man of 1928, the various ancestral beings who had formed his heritage and the bulwark of his ego, and the nameless denizens of the other eons and other worlds which that first hideous flash of ultimate perception had identified with him. Slowly the waves of the Being surged out in reply, trying to make plain what was almost beyond the reach of an earthly mind.

All descended lines of beings of the finite dimensions, continued the waves, and all stages of growth in each one of these beings, are merely manifestations of one archetypal and eternal being in the space outside dimensions. Each local being—son, father, grandfather, and so on—and each stage of individual being—infant, child, boy, man—is merely one of the infinite phases of that same archetypal and eternal being, caused by a variation in the angle of the consciousness-plane which cuts it. Randolph Carter at all ages; Randolph Carter and all his ancestors, both human and pre-human, terrestrial and pre-terrestrial; all these were only phases of one ultimate, eternal "Carter" outside space and time—phantom projections differentiated

only by the angle at which the plane of consciousness happened to cut the eternal archetype in each case.

A slight change of angle could turn the student of today into the child of yesterday; could turn Randolph Carter into that wizard, Edmund Carter who fled from Salem to the hills behind Arkham in 1692, or that Pickman Carter who in the year 2169 would use strange means in repelling the Mongol hordes from Australia; could turn a human Carter into one of those earlier entities which had dwelt in primal Hyperborea and worshipped black, plastic Tsathoggua after flying down from Kythamil, the double planet that once revolved around Arcturus; could turn a terrestrial Carter to a remotely ancestral and doubtfully shaped dweller on Kythamil itself, or a still remoter creature of trans-galactic Stronti, or a four-dimensional gaseous consciousness in an older space-time continuum, or a vegetable brain of the future on a dark, radio-active comet of inconceivable orbit—and so on, in endless cosmic cycle.

The archetypes, throbbed the waves, are the people of the Ultimate Abyss—formless, incalculable, and guessed at only by rare dreamers on the low-dimensional worlds. Chief among such was this informing Being itself . . . *which indeed was Carter's own archetype.* The glutless zeal of Carter and all his forbears for forbidden cosmic secrets was a natural result of derivation from the Supreme Archetype. On every world all great wizards, all great thinkers, all great artists, are facets of It.

Almost stunned with awe, and with a kind of terrifying delight, Randolph Carter's consciousness did homage to that transcendent Entity from which it was derived. As the waves paused again he pondered in the mighty silence, thinking of strange tributes, stranger questions, and still stranger requests. Curious concepts flowed conflictingly through a brain dazed with unaccustomed vistas and unforeseen disclosures. It occurred to him that, if these disclosures were literally true, he might bodily visit all those infinitely distant ages and parts of the universe which he had hitherto known only in dreams, could he but command the magic to change the angle of his consciousness-plane. And did not the silver key supply that magic? Had it not first changed him from a man in 1928 to a boy in 1883, and then to something quite outside time? Oddly, despite his present apparent absence of body, he knew that the key was still with him.

While the silence still lasted, Randolph Carter radiated forth the thoughts and questions which assailed him. He knew that in this ultimate abyss, he was equidistant from every fact of his archetype—human or non-human, terrestrial or extra-terrestrial, galactic or trans-galactic; and his curiosity regarding the other phases of his being—especially those phases which were farthest from an earthly 1928 in time and space, or which had most persistently haunted his dreams throughout life—was at fever heat. He felt that his archetypal Entity could at will send him bodily to any of these phases of bygone and distant life by changing his consciousness-plane, and despite the

marvels he had undergone he burned for the further marvel of walking in the flesh through those grotesque and incredible scenes which visions of the night had fragmentarily brought him.

Without definite intention he was asking the Presence for access to a dim, fantastic world whose five multicolored suns, alien constellations, dizzily black crags, clawed, tapir-snouted denizens, bizarre metal towers, unexplained tunnels, and cryptical floating cylinders had intruded again and again upon his slumbers. That world, he felt vaguely, was in all the conceivable cosmos the one most freely in touch with others; and he longed to explore the vistas whose beginnings he had glimpsed, and to embark through space to those still remoter worlds with which the clawed, snouted denizens trafficked. There was no time for fear. As at all crises of his strange life, sheer cosmic curiosity triumphed over everything else.

When the waves resumed their awesome pulsing, Carter knew that his terrible request was granted. The Being was telling him of the nighted gulfs through which he would have to pass, of the unknown quintuple star in an unsuspected galaxy around which the alien world revolved, and of the burrowing inner horrors against which the clawed, snouted race of that world perpetually fought. It told him, too, of how the angle of his personal consciousness-plane, and the angle of his consciousness-plane regarding the space-time elements of the sought-for world, would have to be tilted simultaneously in order to restore to that world the Carter-facet which had dwelt there.

The Presence warned him to be sure of his symbols if he wished ever to return from the remote and alien world he had chosen, and he radiated back an impatient affirmation; confident that the silver key, which he felt was with him and which he knew had tilted both world and personal planes in throwing him back to 1883, contained those symbols which were meant. And now the Being, grasping his impatience, signified its readiness to accomplish the monstrous precipitation. The waves abruptly ceased, and there supervened a momentary stillness tense with nameless and dreadful expectancy.

Then, without warning, came a whirring and drumming that swelled to a terrific thundering. Once again Carter felt himself the focal point of an intense concentration of energy which smote and hammered and seared unbearably in the now-familiar rhythm of outer space, and which he could not classify as either the blasting heat of a blazing star, or the all-petrifying cold of the ultimate abyss. Bands and rays of color utterly foreign to any spectrum of our universe played and wove and interlaced before him, and he was conscious of a frightful velocity of motion. He caught one fleeting glimpse of a figure sitting *alone* upon a cloudy throne more hexagonal than otherwise. . . .

## CHAPTER 6

As the Hindoo paused in his story he saw that de Marigny and Phillips were watching him absorbedly. Aspinwall pretended to ignore the narrative

and kept his eyes ostentatiously on the papers before him. The alien-rhythmed ticking of the coffin-shaped clock took on a new and portentous meaning, while the fumes from the choked, neglected tripods wove themselves into fantastic and inexplicable shapes, and formed disturbing combinations with the grotesque figures of the draft-swayed tapestries. The old Negro who had tended them was gone—perhaps some growing tension had frightened him out of the house. An almost apologetic hesitancy hampered the speaker as he resumed in his oddly labored yet idiomatic voice.

"You have found these things of the abyss hard to believe," he said, "but you will find the tangible and material things ahead still harder. That is the way of our minds. Marvels are doubly incredible when brought into three dimensions from the vague regions of possible dream. I shall not try to tell you much—that would be another and very different story. I will tell only what you absolutely have to know."

Carter, after that final vortex of alien and polychromatic rhythm, had found himself in what for a moment he thought was his old insistent dream. He was, as many a night before, walking amidst throngs of clawed, snouted beings through the streets of a labyrinth of inexplicably fashioned metal under a blaze of diverse solar color; and as he looked down he saw that his body was like those of the others—rugose, partly squamous, and curiously articulated in a fashion mainly insect-like yet not without a caricaturish resemblance to the human outline. The silver key was still in his grasp, though held by a noxious-looking claw.

In another moment the dream-sense vanished, and he felt rather as one just awakened from a dream. The ultimate abyss—the Being—the entity of absurd, outlandish race called Randolph Carter on a world of the future not yet born—some of these things were parts of the persistent recurrent dreams of the wizard Zkauba on the planet Yaddith. They were too persistent—they interfered with his duties in weaving spells to keep the frightful Dholes in their burrows, and became mixed up with his recollections of the myriad real worlds he had visited in light-beam envelopes. And now they had become quasi-real as never before. This heavy, material silver key in his right upper claw, exact image of one he had dreamt about, meant no good. He must rest and reflect, and consult the tablets of Nning for advice on what to do. Climbing a metal wall in a lane off the main concourse, he entered his apartment and approached the rack of tablets.

Seven day-fractions later Zkauba squatted on his prism in awe and half despair, for the truth had opened up a new and conflicting set of memories. Nevermore could he know the peace of being one entity. For all time and space he was two: Zkauba the wizard of Yaddith, disgusted with the thought of the repellent earth-mammal Carter that he was to be and had been, and Randolph Carter, of Boston on the Earth, shivering with fright at the clawed, snouted thing which he had once been, and had become again.

The time units spent on Yaddith, croaked the Swami—whose labored voice was beginning to show signs of fatigue—made a tale in themselves

which could not be related in brief compass. There were trips to Stronti and Mthura and Kath, and other worlds in the twenty-eight galaxies accessible to the light-beam envelopes of the creatures of Yaddith, and trips back and forth through eons of time with the aid of the silver key and various other symbols known to Yaddith's wizards. There were hideous struggles with the bleached viscous Dholes in the primal tunnels that honeycombed the planet. There were awed sessions in libraries amongst the massed lore of ten thousand worlds living and dead. There were tense conferences with other minds of Yaddith, including that of the Arch-Ancient Buo. Zkauba told no one of what had befallen his personality, but when the Randolph Carter facet was uppermost he would study furiously every possible means of returning to the Earth and to human form, and would desperately practise human speech with the alien throat-organs so ill adapted to it.

The Carter-facet had soon learned with horror that the silver key was unable to effect his return to human form. It was, as he deduced too late from things he remembered, things he dreamed, and things he inferred from the lore of Yaddith, a product of Hyperborea on Earth; with power over the personal consciousness-angles of human beings alone. It could, however, change the planetary angle and send the user at will through time in an unchanged body. There had been an added spell which gave it limitless powers it otherwise lacked; but this, too, was a human discovery—peculiar to a spatially unreachable region, and not to be duplicated by the wizards of Yaddith. It had been written on the undecipherable parchment in the hideously carven box with the silver key, and Carter bitterly lamented that he had left it behind. The now inaccessible Being of the abyss had warned him to be sure of his symbols, and had doubtless thought he lacked nothing.

As time wore on he strove harder and harder to utilize the monstrous lore of Yaddith in finding a way back to the abyss and the omnipotent Entity. With his new knowledge he could have done much toward reading the cryptic parchment; but that power, under present conditions, was merely ironic. There were times, however, when the Zkauba-facet was uppermost, and when he strove to erase the conflicting Carter-memories which troubled him.

Thus long spaces of time wore on—ages longer than the brain of man could grasp, since the beings of Yaddith die only after prolonged cycles. After many hundreds of revolutions the Carter-facet seemed to gain on the Zkauba-facet, and would spend vast periods calculating the distance of Yaddith in space and time from the human Earth that was to be. The figures were staggering—eons of light-years beyond counting—but the immemorial lore of Yaddith fitted Carter to grasp such things. He cultivated the power of dreaming himself momentarily Earthward, and learned many things about our planet that he had never known before. But he could not dream the needed formula on the missing parchment.

Then at last he conceived a wild plan of escape from Yaddith—which

began when he found a drug that would keep his Zkauba-facet always dormant, yet without dissolution of the knowledge and memories of Zkauba. He thought that his calculations would let him perform a voyage with a light-wave envelope such as no being of Yaddith had ever performed—a *bodily* voyage through nameless eons and across incredible galactic reaches to the solar system and the Earth itself. Once on Earth, though in the body of a clawed, snouted thing, he might be able somehow to find—and finish deciphering—the strangely hieroglyphed parchment he had left in the car at Arkham; and with its aid—and the key's—resume his normal terrestrial semblance.

He was not blind to the perils of the attempt. He knew that when he had brought the planet-angle to the right eon (a thing impossible to do while hurtling through space), Yaddith would be a dead world dominated by triumphant Dholes, and that his escape in the light-wave envelope would be a matter of grave doubt. Likewise was he aware of how he must achieve suspended animation, in the manner of an adept, to endure the eon-long flight through fathomless abysses. He knew, too, that—assuming his voyage succeeded—he must immunize himself to the bacterial and other earthly conditions hostile to a body from Yaddith. Furthermore, he must provide a way of feigning human shape on Earth until he might recover and decipher the parchment and resume that shape in truth. Otherwise he would probably be discovered and destroyed by the people in horror as a thing that should not be. And there must be some gold—luckily obtainable on Yaddith—to tide him over that period of quest.

Slowly Carter's plans went forward. He provided a light-wave envelope of abnormal toughness, able to stand both the prodigious time-transition and the unexampled flight through space. He tested all his calculations, and sent forth his Earthward dreams again and again, bringing them as close as possible to 1928. He practised suspended animation with marvelous success. He discovered just the bacterial agent he needed, and worked out the varying gravity-stress to which he must become used. He artfully fashioned a waxen mask and loose costume enabling him to pass among men as a human being of a sort, and devised a doubly potent spell with which to hold back the Dholes at the moment of his starting from the dead, black Yaddith of the inconceivable future. He took care, too, to assemble a large supply of the drugs—unobtainable on Earth—which would keep his Zkauba-facet in abeyance till he might shed the Yaddith body, nor did he neglect a small store of gold for earthly use.

The starting-day was a time of doubt and apprehension. Carter climbed up to his envelope-platform, on the pretext of sailing for the triple star Nython, and crawled into the sheath of shining metal. He had just room to perform the ritual of the silver key, and as he did so he slowly started the levitation of his envelope. There was an appalling seething and darkening of the day, and a hideous racking of pain. The cosmos seemed to reel irresponsibly, and the other constellations danced in a black sky.

All at once Carter felt a new equilibrium. The cold of interstellar gulfs gnawed at the outside of his envelope, and he could see that he floated free in space—the metal building from which he had started having decayed years before. Below him the ground was festering with gigantic Dholes; and even as he looked, one reated up several hundred feet and levelled a bleached, viscous end at him. But his spells were effective, and in another moment he was falling away from Yaddith, unharmed.

## CHAPTER 7

In that bizarre room in New Orleans, from which the old black servant had instinctively fled, the odd voice of Swami Chandraputra grew hoarser still.

"Gentlemen," he continued, "I will not ask you to believe these things until I have shown you special proof. Accept it, then, as a myth, when I tell you of the *thousands of light-years—thousands of years of time, and uncounted billions of miles* that Randolph Carter hurtled through space as a nameless, alien entity in a thin envelope of electron-activated metal. He timed his period of suspended animation with utmost care, planning to have it end only a few years before the time of landing on the Earth in or near 1928.

"He will never forget that awakening. Remember, gentlemen, that before that con-long sleep *he had lived consciously for thousands of terrestrial years amidst the alien and horrible wonders of Yaddith*. There was a hideous gnawing of cold, a cessation of menacing dreams, and a glance through the eye-plates of the envelope. Stars, clusters, nebulae, on every hand—and *at last their outlines bore some kinship to the constellations of Earth that he knew*.

"Some day his descent into the solar system may be told. He saw Kynarth and Yuggoth on the rim, passed close to Neptune and glimpsed the hellish white fungi that spot it, learned an untellable secret from the close-glimpsed mists of Jupiter, and saw the horror on one of the satellites, and gazed at the cyclopean ruins that sprawl over Mars' ruddy disk. When the Earth drew near he saw it as a thin crescent which swelled alarmingly in size. He slackened speed, though his sensations of homecoming made him wish to lose not a moment. I will not try to tell you of these sensations as I learned them from Carter.

"Well, toward the last Carter hovered about in the Earth's upper air waiting till daylight came over the Western Hemisphere. He wanted to land where he had left—near the Snake Den in the hills behind Arkham. If any of you have been away from home long—and I know one of you has—I leave it to you how the sight of New England's rolling hills and great elms and gnarled orchards and ancient stone walls must have affected him.

"He came down at dawn in the lower meadow of the old Carter place, and was thankful for the silence and solitude. It was autumn, as when he

had left, and the smell of the hills was balm to his soul. He managed to drag the metal envelope up the slope of the timber lot into the Snake Den, though it would not go through the weed-choked fissure to the inner cave. It was there also that he covered his alien body with the human clothing and waxen mask which would be necessary. He kept the envelope here for over a year, till certain circumstances made a new hiding-place necessary.

"He walked to Arkham—incidentally practising the management of his body in human posture and against terrestrial gravity—and got his gold changed to money at a bank. He also made some inquiries—posing as a foreigner ignorant of much English—and found that the year was 1930, only two years after the goal he had aimed at.

"Of course, his position was horrible. Unable to assert his identity, forced to live on guard every moment, with certain difficulties regarding food, and with a need to conserve the alien drug which kept his Zkauba-facet dormant, he felt that he must act as quickly as possible. Going to Boston and taking a room in the decaying West End, where he could live cheaply and inconspicuously, he at once established inquiries concerning Randolph Carter's estate and effects. It was then that he learned how anxious Mr. Aspinwall, here, was to have the estate divided, and how valiantly Mr. de Marigny and Mr. Phillips strove to keep it intact."

The Hindoo bowed, though no expression crossed his dark, tranquil, and thickly bearded face.

"Indirectly," he continued, "Carter secured a good copy of the missing parchment and began working on its deciphering. I am glad to say that I was able to help in all this—for he appealed to me quite early, and through me came in touch with other mystics throughout the world. I went to live with him in Boston—a wretched place in Chambers Street. As for the parchment—I am pleased to help Mr. de Marigny in his perplexity. To him let me say that the language of those hieroglyphics is not Naacal, but R'lyehian, which was brought to Earth by the spawn of Cthulhu countless ages ago. It is, of course, a translation—there was an Hyperborean original millions of years earlier in the primal tongue of Tsath-yo.

"There was more to decipher than Carter had looked for, but at no time did he give up hope. Early this year he made great strides through a book he imported from Nepal, and there is no question but that he will win before long. Unfortunately, however, one handicap has developed—the exhaustion of the alien drug which keeps the Zkauba-facet dormant. This is not, however, as great a calamity as was feared. Carter's personality is gaining in the body, and when Zkauba comes uppermost—for shorter and shorter periods, and now only when evoked by some unusual excitement—he is generally too dazed to undo any of Carter's work. He can not find the metal envelope that would take him back to Yaddith, for although he almost did, once, Carter hid it anew at a time when the Zkauba-facet was wholly latent. All the harm he has done is to frighten a few people and create certain nightmare rumors among the Poles and Lithuanians of Boston's West End. So

far, he has never injured the careful disguise prepared by the Carter-facet, though he sometimes throws it off so that parts have to be replaced. I have seen what lies beneath—and it is not good to see.

"A month ago Carter saw the advertisement of this meeting, and knew that he must act quickly to save his estate. He could not wait to decipher the parchment and resume his human form. Consequently he deputed me to act for him.

"Gentlemen, I say to you that Randolph Carter is not dead; that he is temporarily in an anomalous condition, but that within two or three months at the outside he will be able to appear in proper form and demand the custody of his estate. I am prepared to offer proof if necessary. Therefore I beg that you will adjourn this meeting for an indefinite period."

## CHAPTER 8

De Marigny and Phillips stared at the Hindoo as if hypnotized, while Aspinwall emitted a series of snorts and bellows. The old attorney's disgust had by now surged into open rage, and he pounded the table with an apoplectically veined fist. When he spoke, it was in a kind of bark.

"How long is this foolery to be borne? I've listened an hour to this madman—this faker—and now he has the damned effrontery to say Randolph Carter is alive—to ask us to postpone the settlement for no good reason! Why don't you throw the scoundrel out, de Marigny? Do you mean to make us all the butts of a charlatan or idiot?"

De Marigny quietly raised his hand and spoke softly.

"Let us think slowly and clearly. This has been a very singular tale, and there are things in it which I, as a mystic not altogether ignorant, recognize as far from impossible. Furthermore—since 1930 I have received letters from the Swami which tally with his account."

As he paused, old Mr. Phillips ventured a word.

"Swami Chandraputra spoke of proofs. I, too, recognize much that is significant in this story, and I have myself had many oddly corroborative letters from the Swami during the last two years; but some of these statements are very extreme. Is there not something tangible which can be shown?"

At last the impassive-faced Swami replied, slowly and hoarsely, and drawing an object from the pocket of his loose coat as he spoke.

"While none of you here has ever *seen* the silver key itself, Messrs. de Marigny and Phillips have seen photographs of it. *Does this look familiar to you?*"

He fumblingly laid on the table, with his large, white-mittenend hand, a heavy key of tarnished silver—nearly five inches long, of unknown and utterly exotic workmanship, and covered from end to end with hieroglyphs of the most bizarre description. De Marigny and Phillips gasped.

"That's it!" cried de Marigny. "The camera doesn't lie. I couldn't be mistaken!"

But Aspinwall had already launched a reply.

"Fools! What does it prove? If that's really the key that belonged to my cousin, it's up to this foreigner—this damned nigger—to explain how he got it! Randolph Carter vanished with the key four years ago. How do we know he wasn't robbed and murdered? He was half crazy himself, and in touch with still crazier people.

"Look here, you nigger—where did you get that key? Did you kill Randolph Carter?"

The Swami's features, abnormally placid, did not change; but the remote,irisless black eyes behind them blazed dangerously. He spoke with great difficulty.

"Please control yourself, Mr. Aspinwall. There is another form of proof that I *could* give, but its effect upon everybody would not be pleasant. Let us be reasonable. Here are some papers obviously written since 1930, and in the unmistakable style of Randolph Carter."

He clumsily drew a long envelope from inside his loose coat and handed it to the sputtering attorney as de Marigny and Phillips watched with chaotic thoughts and a dawning feeling of supernal wonder.

"Of course the handwriting is almost illegible—but remember that Randolph Carter now has no hands well adapted to forming human script."

Aspinwall looked through the papers hurriedly, and was visibly perplexed, but he did not change his demeanor. The room was tense with excitement and nameless dread, and the alien rhythm of the coffin-shaped clock had an utterly diabolic sound to de Marigny and Phillips, though the lawyer seemed affected not at all.

Aspinwall spoke again. "These look like clever forgeries. If they aren't, they may mean that Randolph Carter has been brought under the control of people with no good purpose. There's only one thing to do—have this faker arrested. De Marigny, will you telephone for the police?"

"Let us wait," answered their host. "I do not think this case calls for the police. I have a certain idea. Mr. Aspinwall, this gentleman is a mystic of real attainments. He says he is in the confidence of Randolph Carter. Will it satisfy you if he can answer certain questions which could be answered only by one in such confidence? I know Carter, and can ask such questions. Let me get a book which I think will make a good test."

He turned toward the door to the library, Phillips dazedly following in a kind of automatic way. Aspinwall remained where he was, studying closely the Hindoo who confronted him with abnormally impassive face. Suddenly, as Chandraputra clumsily restored the silver key to his pocket, the lawyer emitted a guttural shout.

"Hey, by Heaven! I've got it! This rascal is in disguise. I don't believe he's an East Indian at all. That face—it isn't a face, but a *mask*! I guess his story put that into my head, but it's true. It never moves, and that turban and beard hide the edges. This fellow's a common crook! He isn't even a foreigner—I've been watching his language. He's a Yankee of some sort.

And look at those mittens—he knows his fingerprints could be spotted. Damn you, I'll pull that thing off—"

"Stop!" The hoarse, oddly alien voice of the Swami held a tone beyond all mere earthly fright. "I told you there was *another form of proof which I could give if necessary*, and I warned you not to provoke me to it. This red-faced old meddler is right—I'm not really an East Indian. *This face is a mask, and what it covers is not human.* You others have guessed—I felt that minutes ago. It wouldn't be pleasant if I took that mask off—let it alone, Ernest. I may as well tell you that *I am Randolph Carter.*"

No one moved. Aspinwall snorted and made vague motions. De Marigny and Phillips, across the room, watched the workings of the red face and studied the back of the turbaned figure that confronted him. The clock's abnormal ticking was hideous, and the tripod fumes and swaying arras danced a dance of death. The half-choking lawyer broke the silence.

"No you don't, you crook—you can't scare me! You've reasons of your own for not wanting that mask off. Maybe we'd know who you are. Off with it—"

As he reached forward, the Swami seized his hand with one of his own clumsily mittened members, evoking a curious cry of mixed pain and surprise. De Marigny started toward the two, but paused confused as the pseudo-Hindoo's shout of protest changed to a wholly inexplicable rattling and buzzing sound. Aspinwall's red face was furious, and with his free hand he made another lunge at his opponent's bushy beard. This time he succeeded in getting a hold, and at his frantic tug the whole waxen visage came loose from the turban and clung to the lawyer's apoplectic fist.

As it did so, Aspinwall uttered a frightful gurgling cry, and Phillips and de Marigny saw his face convulsed with a wilder, deeper and more hideous epilepsy of stark panic than ever they had seen on human countenance before. The pseudo-Swami had meanwhile released his other hand and was standing as if dazed, making buzzing noises of a most abnormal quality. Then the turbaned figure slumped oddly into a posture scarcely human, and began a curious, fascinated sort of shuffle toward the coffin-shaped clock that ticked out its cosmic and abnormal rhythm. His now uncovered face was turned away, and de Marigny and Phillips could not see what the lawyer's act had disclosed. Then their attention was turned to Aspinwall, who was sinking ponderously to the floor. The spell was broken—but when they reached the old man he was dead.

Turning quickly to the shuffling Swami's receding back, de Marigny saw one of the great white mittens drop listlessly off a dangling arm. The fumes of the olibanum were thick, and all that could be glimpsed of the revealed hand was something long and black. Before the Creole could reach the retreating figure, old Mr. Phillips laid a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Don't!" he whispered. "We don't know what we're up against. That other facet, you know—Zkauba, the wizard of Yaddith. . . ."

The turbanned figure had now reached the abnormal clock, and the watchers saw through the dense fumes a blurred black claw fumbling with the tall, hieroglyphed door. The fumbling made a queer, clicking sound. Then the figure entered the coffin-shaped case and pulled the door shut after it.

De Marigny could no longer be restrained, but when he reached and opened the clock it was empty. The abnormal ticking went on, beating out the dark, cosmic rhythm which underlies all mystical gate-openings. On the floor the great white mitten, and the dead man with a bearded mask clutched in his hand, had nothing further to reveal.

\* \* \* \* \*

A year passed, and nothing has been heard of Randolph Carter. His estate is still unsettled. The Boston address from which one "Swami Chandraputra" sent inquiries to various mystics in 1930-31-32 was indeed tenanted by a strange Hindoo, but he left shortly before the date of the New Orleans conference and has never been seen since. He was said to be dark, expressionless, and bearded, and his landlord thinks the swarthy mask—which was duly exhibited—looks very much like him. He was never, however, suspected of any connection with the nightmare apparitions whispered of by local Slavs. The hills behind Arkham were searched for the "metal envelope," but nothing of the sort was ever found. However, a clerk in Arkham's First National Bank does recall a queer turbanned man who cashed an odd bit of gold bullion in October, 1930.

De Marigny and Phillips scarcely know what to make of the business. After all, what was proved? There was a story. There was a key which might have been forged from one of the pictures Carter had freely distributed in 1928. There were papers—all indecisive. There was a masked stranger, but who now living saw behind the mask? Amidst the strain and the olibanum fumes that act of vanishing in the clock might easily have been a dual hallucination. Hindoos know much of hypnotism. Reason proclaims the "Swami" a criminal with designs on Randolph Carter's estate. But the autopsy said that Aspinwall had died of shock. Was it rage *alone* which caused it? And some things in that story . . .

In a vast room hung with strangely figured arras and filled with olibanum fumes, Etienne-Laurent de Marigny often sits listening with vague sensations to the abnormal rhythm of that hieroglyphed, coffin-shaped clock.

# *The Bookshop*

by Nelson Bond

*Always to be relied upon for a smooth and pleasing tale, Nelson Bond turns his hand to a theme which has subconsciously bothered all writers. Where do their novels really come from? What has happened to the novels which great men might have written, and didn't? What would Shakespeare have done had he lived five more years? It's a perplexing thing to be a writer, to know for a fact that one will definitely produce a novel or a short story two years from today, and yet have not the slightest idea of what it will be! The thought always perturbs the literary man. Let Nelson Bond tell you about it.*

J

N THE dead sultriness of Manhattan midsummer there was no incentive to write. Marston's apartment was like the inside of a kiln. Two hours ago he had stripped off his damp shirt and sat down before his typewriter. Now, for all his labors, he had nothing to show but a dozen crumpled balls of bond paper flung haphazardly in and at the wastepaper basket.

"Damn novels!" muttered Marston. "And damn editors with deadlines. And damn this heat!"

He swept a handful of white and yellow sheets from the tray before him, leafed through them bitterly. It was a good idea, his plot for this novel. He read again the three chapters he had completed. It was good work; some of the best he had ever done, smoothly written. *The Underlings*. A psychological story of defeat, and of ones who let themselves be defeated. "*The fault, dear Brutus, is not with our stars—*"

A good theme. And so far, a good job. But—

This heat! This overwhelming, enervating heat. He was, Marston realized with a sudden petulant anger, ill. Actually and physically ill. He gave up. With a final despairing glance at the white sheet shining in the platen roll, he rose. He was shocked to find his exhaustion so deep that as he stood up there danced before his eyes a black vertigo, brief but frightening.

There could be only suffocation and discomfort so long as he remained

here. Out of doors it would be hot, too, but there might be a ghost of a breeze stirring in the shaded streets down by the river.

Marston put on shirt and coat, and went out.

He had not remembered the bookshop was along this way—had, indeed, quite forgotten the little shop until suddenly there it was, just a few paces before him. Then he recalled the several occasions on which, before, he had seen it and planned to drop in for a browse. Each time, circumstances had prevented his doing so.

The bookshop was far from prepossessing in appearance. It was ancient and musty, and its only lure was the faint aura of mystery ever attendant to dark neglected places. How long it had been a fixture in this neighborhood, Marston had no way of knowing. It did, apparently, but a slight business, for of the scores who passed it by, none save himself so much as turned a head to peer into its dusty window.

He had seen it first a year ago or so—that afternoon when, with poor Thatcher, he had been riding by here on a bus. Thatcher was a minor poet; not a very good one, but an ardent one. He had been regaling Marston with an enthusiastic preview of his latest masterpiece, soon to be released.

"Very soon, Marston. Just a few more stanzas and it goes to the publisher. It . . . it's a good work, Marston. Oh, I know that sounds braggart, coming from me. But a writer can tell when his work is good or bad. This isn't like anything I've done before. It's poetry this time. *Real* poetry—"

His tone was pathetically eager. Marston murmured, "I'm sure it is, Thatcher."

"I know it is. I'm calling it *Songs of a New Century*. It will make me, Marston. Up to now, I've just been a versifier. This book will give me a reputation. See if I'm not right . . . Oh, I say!"

He stopped suddenly. Marston, glancing up swiftly, remembered that Thatcher's health was reportedly on the thin edge. The man didn't look at all well. His cheeks were too pale, his eyes too dark and sunken. "What is it, old man? You all right?"

"What?" Thatcher recovered his poise, ventured the slimmest excuse for a smile. "Oh . . . oh, yes, quite!" But he pressed the buzzer that drew the bus to the curb and rose, Marston thought, a little abruptly. "I'm fine, thanks. But I just remembered a little errand. Chap I have to see. In there."

And he pointed to the shop before which Marston now stood.

Marston insisted, "You're sure you feel well? Perhaps I should come along—?"

"Now, don't you worry about me. I'll be all right. Chap's an old friend of mine." Thatcher climbed down from the bus. He called back over his shoulder, "See you later, Marston. Watch for the *Songs*—"

But he had, thought Marston regretfully, been mistaken. On both counts. They never met again. Nor did the new book ever appear. Poor Thatcher

was not so well as he had hopefully claimed. It was his heart. The next day Marston read his name in the obituary column.

All of a year ago, that had been. Since then, Marston had thought often of the little bookshop. It held a sort of macabre fascination for him; an association of ideas Marston could not explain even to himself. Into that little shop Thatcher had disappeared. Marston had never seen him again. It made the bookshop a—a sort of symbol.

Silly, of course. But last winter when Marston lay ill of the flu and tossed for restless hours in delirium, it had become almost an obsession with him. A compulsion clung to him; he experienced an insensate desire to climb from his sickbed and visit it. A curious urge, but one so powerful that when finally he recovered, he *did* make a special trip to the little shop.

But he had chosen a poor time. It was closed. The door was latched and bolted, and the shades drawn tight.

Now, however, it was not closed. The shade was up, the door an inch or so invitingly ajar. And though the shop was small, there would be coolness in its musty depths. The sun poured down on Marston's head and pressed on his shoulders with a ponderable strength. His head ached, and a dull nausea was upon him.

He opened the door and went in.

The transition from glaring sunlight to shaded dark was abrupt; at first he could see nothing. Somewhere in the back of the shop a bell jangled softly; ancient silences seemed to well in upon the cheerful, tinny sound, engulfing, stilling it.

Marston, stumbling forward, bumped against a table. Surprise brought a small "Oh!" to his lips, and he clung to the table, waiting for his moment of blindness to pass. Out of the shadows before him came a quiet, sympathetic voice.

"Did you hurt yourself, my friend?"

Marston complained, "It's dark in here."

"Dark?" A moment's silence. Then, "Dark, yes. It is, I suppose. But peaceful."

Marston could see more plainly now. He stood in the center of a small, low-ceilinged room walled on either side with shelves of books. The table before him also was piled high with bound volumes. Some were old and faded; others, he was surprised to notice, were brightly new.

Beyond the table was a tiny desk, and at the desk a quiet figure sat, imperturbably scratching with an old goose quill in a ledger open before him. In the ill light Marston could not clearly see the proprietor's face, but he saw bent shoulders, and white hair shining like a halo in the gloom. There was, he felt, something vaguely familiar about the old man's features—something tantalizingly near the fringes of his memory. . . .

It slipped away even as he tried to grasp it. And the proprietor looked up. "Is there anything in particular, my friend?"

"Just looking," said Marston. Like all book-lovers, he loathed efficiency in the management of a bookstore. He preferred seeking, in his own good time and at his own whim, whatever of literary interest the shop might hold for him.

The old man nodded.

"There is no need for haste," he said, and returned to his interminable scribbling. The goose-quill pen scraped dryly but not unpleasantly. Marston turned to the shelves.

It did not occur to him at once that there was anything unusual about the books on which he looked. That realization came upon him gradually; hence it came as a slow, growing wonder and not with any deep, sharp sense of shock. There are so many books, so many authors. Their names are legion; easily forgotten. Marston's eyes had traveled over perhaps a full row before there awakened in his mind the awareness that he had viewed something strange and puzzling, something that did not ring quite true.

He glanced back along the row. The proprietor apparently had made no effort to separate his stock according to subject matter. Poetry, plays and novels, essays and texts stood side by side in scrambled heterogeneity. Titles heretofore unknown by Marston. New names and old . . . old thoughts and new.

Then he saw a thin volume, brown with age. The title, *Agamemnon*. And the author . . . William Shakespeare!

*Agamemnon* . . . by Shakespeare? Marston knew of no such title. The hot spark ever latent in the heart of the bookworshiper leaped suddenly into blaze. One of two things: he had stumbled across either the most amazing discovery of the century or the greatest hoax ever perpetrated in the name of art. His pulse quickening with excitement, Marston reached for the volume.

Then his hand, in reaching, stayed. For now he saw, senses sharpened by his discovery, still other titles; books equally unknown and equally amazing. *Cap'n Catfish*, by Mark Twain. *The Leprechaun*, by Donn Byrne. John Galsworthy's *Feet of Clay*, and *Darkling Moors* by Charlotte Brontë.

Swiftly his gaze dropped to another shelf. He saw with a vast, incredulous incomprehension *Christopher Crump* by Charles Dickens, *The Gargoyle's Eye*, by Edgar Allan Poe, Thackeray's *Colonel Coperthwaite*, and *The Private Casebook of Sherlock Holmes*, by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

He had heard no footsteps, but now he was aware that at his side stood the proprietor of the little shop. There was quiet pleasure in the old man's voice.

"You admire my books, young friend?"

Marston could only wave a hand at the shelves. His speech was stammering, confused.

"But . . . these! I don't understand!"

"You are Robert Marston, aren't you? Fantasy is your field. You should appreciate these others."

Marston's gaze helplessly followed the proprietor's gesture. He looked upon names well known to him as his own, but at titles never before dreamed of. *The Troglodytes*, by Jules Verne, Charles Fort's *What Unseen Presence?*, *Hanuman, the First God*, by Ignatius Donnelly, Weinbaum's *Conquest of Space*, and Lovecraft's bulky *Complete History of Demonology*.

And under these a smaller volume; a thin, bright volume with untarnished bookjacket. Its title . . . *Songs of a New Century*. Its author . . . David Thatcher.

It was then, suddenly, that Marston understood. A great dull prescience filled him, and to his host he said in a voice that was strangely tired, "I suppose, then *it*—*it*, too, is here?"

And the old man nodded gravely.

"*The Underlings?* Yes, my son; *it*, too, is here."

There was but one copy, fresh and shining new as if it had at this very moment come from the publisher's office. The dust jacket was brave and fair. Even in this shaken hour, Marston's heart knew a swift, high lift of pride in this, his book.

He reached for it—then hesitated. And of his aged host he asked, "May I?"

"It is your book," said the old man.

And Marston took it down. . . .

Oh, some changes had been made, he found, in the opening chapters. But they were minor editings. In the main, those scenes were as he had written them. With shaking hands he turned the clean white pages. His eyes sought avidly words that heretofore had never known the permanence of print, read thoughts that up till now had existed only in his mind.

And swiftly though he read, he knew with a fierce, bright joy that he had not erred in claiming this his finest work.

There was no mediocrity in this book; no faltering, no stumbling confusion of ideas. Each sentence was perfect; no word or thought or phrase but shone with lustrous purity. This was the book Marston had always meant to write; it was the book he had always known lay somewhere deep within him. Here was the triumphant accomplishment of his writing powers. And Marston, who knew books, knew that this book was great, and that in it, at the end, his skill had attained its full fruition. . . .

*At the end!*

He closed the book, and its closing was a small and startling sound in the fusty silence. He stared at his host, knowing now wherein that face and form had been familiar. A coldness was upon him, and a sudden fear, and he said loudly, "But no! Not now, old man! Not before it is finished—"

The old man said quietly, "Surely you see it cannot be finished over *there*, Marston? Nothing is ever perfect on that side. Only in this bookshop

are stories and songs high and sweet and true as their authors dreamed them.

"There *The Underlings* would be but another book—a clothbound, crippled symbol of a dream that died aborning. Thoughts as lofty as the stars faltering on words too weak to bear them. Tales finished over there are never truly great. Always they lack the wings on which their authors envisioned them.

"Only in the library of the left undone may a story reach the heights intended by its creator. Here—beside an epic Homer ever meant to write, a play that Marlowe planned but did not put into words, Galsworthy's last and greatest romance, ten thousand tales unwritten by a thousand dreamers—here *The Underlings* can take its rightful place in the imperishable library of might-have-been.

"It is the final price for perfection. And a small one."

His voice soughed into silence like the last faint whisper of the moon-drawn tide. And it seemed to Marston that a new sound reached his ears; it was as though voices spoke to him from some not distant place, voices greeting him in good fellowship, bidding him come and join their camaraderie. He heard—or thought he did—the laughing voice of Thatcher.

"*What's all the fuss, old boy? My soul, but you're making an issue of a simple matter—*"

Now the old man held out his hand to Marston.

"Are you ready, my friend?" he asked.

But—there was the book in his hand. And suddenly there swept into Marston's brain a thought so daring that an ague seized his limbs.

It was not yet too late! Nor would it be until that ancient hand met his. Could he but reach the street outside—and with this book—*The Underlings* might yet be given to the world in all its dreamed perfection!

A swift decision stirred him. With a sudden cry he stepped back from the ancient's proffered clasp, whirled and stumbled toward the doorway. The worn knob slipped beneath his palm; the door held, and in panic desperation he tugged, panting, at the barrier. Behind him the soft voices rose in a wailing crescendo of dismay. A sigh whispered in his ear, "There's no escape, my son. You but delay—"

Then the door was open; and the sunlight, raw, hot, and heavy as the crush of a monstrous fist, was blinding-gold in his eyes. With the precious volume clenched in his hands, he cried aloud his triumph, staggered into the street wildly, heedlessly.

He did not hear the voices raised in swift warning, nor the startled rasp of the klaxon, nor the screaming grind of futile brakes. He heard only the deafening tumult of a world flaming into oblivion . . . then the soft peace once more, and the chiding voice of the ancient one. "You but delay, my son. Are you ready, now?"

And a cool hand meeting his own. . . .

"Couldn't *help* hittin' him!" said the truckman. "I swear to God I couldn't help it! This guy seen it—he'll tell you. He come bustin' right out in front o' me, shoutin' like he was crazy or somethin'. I tried to stop, but—"

"O.K.," said the big man in blue. "O.K. It wasn't your fault. Anybody else see it happen? Where'd he come from, anyhow?"

A witness, white of lip, lifted horror-fascinated eyes from the figure on the asphalt. He pointed a shaking finger.

"Over there, Officer. That vacant lot across the street. I saw him wandering around in there, mumbling to himself. I think he must have had a sun-stroke the way he acted. That property has been vacant for years. Why he'd want to go in there—"

"I'll take your name," said the policeman. "Anybody recognize him? Let's see that book he was carrying. Maybe it's got his name in it."

Someone handed the book to him.

He leafed through the volume briefly, tilted back his cap, and scratched his forehead.

"Hey, now! This is the queerest looking damn' book I ever saw! Look! Only the first three chapters printed . . . and the rest of it nothing but blank pages!"

# One-Man God

by Frank Owen

*It is with pleasure that we present a new and hitherto unpublished Chinese fantasy by the author of The Wind That Tramps the World and The Purple Sea. Frank Owen has never been to China but somehow he has mastered the fragile dreamlike atmosphere of that nation's legendry to perfection. China has passed through many periods of turbulence, but through it all has clung to the ideal of the ultimate desirability of peace and tranquillity. This is expressed very well in Owen's story of the God of the Scented Pine Trees.*

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FAGRANT ink stick, an engraved ink stone and a few brush strokes are all that are needed to tell the story of the God of Scented Pine Trees. Now it must be known that this god revelled in pompous ceremony and was a glorious dignified figure in his silk embroidered robes of sun gold, lush green and purple splendor. He had as many gaudy costumes as there are hours in the round of the year, emblazoned with dragons and unicorns, and exhaling a heady mixture of musk and myrrh and cinnamon, but he was not happy; for alas, only one poor coolie worshipped him. Small wonder then that he was vexed, for gods need worshippers even as men need gods to worship.

The coolie, whose name was Fo Wen, lived in a small mud hut and his most prized possession was a small blackened kettle in which he cooked his rice, and occasionally a bit of turnip to cement together the bones of his emaciated body. But he was unaware that he lacked so much of earth's riches, for each night as he slept on the bare earth his beloved wife returned to him from the realms of her ancestors. Once more they were young and happy because they were together. And so they talked and laughed and were abundantly rich until the moon met the dawn. Ofttimes, Fo Wen wondered whether the dream were the reality or reality the dream even as did Chuang Tzu who dreamed that he was a butterfly who dreamed that he was Chuang Tzu.

Near the hut of Fo Wen stood a stately pine tree. He joyed to sit before his door of an evening, drinking in the beauty of its graceful fronds against

the sky. The odor of pine drifted to him and in the far distance he could hear the tinkle of temple bells. At such times abundant peace crept into his soul and he was rich.

But the God of Scented Pine Trees was not happy. Though he was almost barren of worshippers he wished to be kowtowed to in splendor. Therefore he determined to make Fo Wen, his last suppliant, a very wealthy man. One deep dark middle of the night, he caused a magnificent garden to appear around the small hut of Fo Wen, surrounded by a house of many rooms. The furnishings of these rooms which opened onto the garden were of fine lacquer, teakwood and ivory. The soft handwoven rugs of rich, lush colors, might have put flowers to shame. In one room was a collection of jewels—diamonds, pearls, jades and nephrites, wrought gold and carved silver, turquoise, amber, jasper and carnelian. On the walls were written pictures and landscapes dating back to the Tang dynasty. Every conceivable luxury was in that palace, besides four slender concubines, versed in the arts of music, dance and song.

Then the god touched Fo Wen gently on the shoulder until he awakened. "Blest are you among mortals," he intoned, "for I, the sole God of Scented Pine Trees, have decided to make you rich."

Fo Wen opened his eyes. He appeared slightly incredulous as he gazed about sleepily.

"Rich," he repeated, "rich, what need have I for more riches?"

"As a coolie, certainly your position was not lofty," observed the god, somewhat irritated.

"I was content."

"Is contentment enough? Gaze about you, this magnificent house and garden is all yours. And there are diamonds beyond price."

"What are diamonds?" asked the coolie.

"Next to jade, the most precious thing on earth."

"The most precious thing on earth is a good wife," said Fo Wen.

"Wives, faugh!" said the god. "What do they amount to? Millions of women in China. All chatter like monkeys. Even the worthy ones fade, shrivel and are gone. But diamonds live forever."

"Only a fool thinks a diamond lives!"

"They sparkle as though alive."

"But have they four souls?"

"No."

"Do they breathe?"

"Who said they did?"

"Can you use them for food when you are starving?"

"Our coolie is becoming a philosopher!"

"If toil makes a philosopher, then I am one."

"You read many books?" asked the god, who somehow felt slightly deflated. Why should not this miserable coolie be abject before him, at the power of his majesty?

"I like to read the graceful poems that are flung so frequently on the walls of buildings by enthusiasts of the brush. However, I cannot afford to buy books."

The god brightened perceptibly. "Now you are rich, you can buy all the books you want."

"Only one book do I need, the verses of Lao Tzu that I committed to memory as a youth."

The God of Scented Pine Trees felt as though his nose was out of joint. Why had he never thought to write a book? What was a book, anyway, but a mere jumble of words! He was worried almost into hysterics. It was bad enough to have only one worshipper, without having to share his devotion.

He decided that he would treat the book of Lao Tzu as though it of little importance.

"What did he write that is so memorable?"

Fo Wen reflected for a moment, then he quoted,

"Do not exalt wealth—

Avoid treasuring rare things."

The God of Scented Pine Trees broke into cold sweat. Did this simple coolie realize what he was saying? Surely he could not be so erudite as thus to berate him! Truly, these were difficult days in which to be a god.

He sighed so deeply that it stirred the garden like a breeze.

"Would you like to look through your new house?" he asked brusquely.

"My hut serves my simple needs. Why should I desert it?"

"Because I, thy god, command thee!"

Fo Wen rose wearily to his feet. It had not occurred to him to stand in the presence of the god. Perhaps it was because there was so little in his appearance to command respect. He seemed more worried than regal, he was too fat and gaudily overdressed.

"As you wish," he said without enthusiasm.

"Oh, for a few other worshippers," thought the god, "that I might put this ingrate in his place!" But he remained civil for he badly needed this lone worshipper even though he was so little devout.

"You shall drink from a jade cup," he said.

Fo Wen remained silent. What matter the vessel from which one slakes thirst?

"In your possession will be amber trinkets in which leaves and ferns, insects and lovely flowers are entombed; while all about your home will be gorgeous jade flowers growing, their petals of gems of rainbow colors. The rugs beneath your feet will be soft as moss and of a green sheen. You will bathe in a crystal bath, the like of which may not be found the world over. You will feast on viands of a piquance and delicacy to entice the appetite of a king."

"Rice alone is sufficient for my needs. Possessions mean nothing to me."

"But you will be rich!"

"Have I ever been poor?"

"You, a coolie, ask that?"

"My sleep is deep, my dreams are pleasant."

"Do you not thank me for this house?"

"I worship you, is not that enough?"

The god coughed. "That is very good," he said in an effort to be off-handed, for how good and necessary it was he did not want Fo Wen to know.

Fo Wen was very tired and somewhat distressed that the Scented Pine Tree God should be so persistent. He had labored hard and now in spite of himself his head slipped gently to the good earth and he slept. The god sighed and departed to those realms where only gods may go.

At sunrise, Fo Wen awakened, cooked a bowl of rice, and then departed for his back-breaking toil from dawn till dusk. Strange, he thought, that a god should build him a great house, he who was but one of the countless teaming millions of coolies of China. What did it mean? What was the reason? What need had he for so large a house now that his wife was no longer with him and he was childless?

To be childless, in China, is looked upon as a real calamity. Childless men usually take unto themselves a secondary wife, or a third until the need for progeny has been fulfilled. But not so Fo Wen. Mei Mei was his beloved wife; even death had not separated them, for she came to him in his dreams. He needed no other women, wanted no other woman, even as Emperor Ming Huang had eyes for no other woman after beholding Yang Kwei-fei.

Fo Wen was well educated though he had never attended school. His father had taught him to read and write. The beauty of his brush strokes might have brought envy to an artist. Nature, too, had been his teacher. From the wind in the willows he learned sweet songs which he longed to translate into words; from the sky at evening he drew inspiration and serenity; from the glory of scented pine trees he drew faith. So it was but natural he worshipped their god. That the god was all but bankrupt as far as worshippers were concerned, he did not know.

In the early evening, Fo Wen returned to the garden which was surrounded by the various rooms of the magnificent house. He was deeply troubled as he walked through the carved red gates, past the spirit screen, and on toward his crude hut that remained an incongruous blot on the beauty of the garden. He prepared his usual bowl of rice over a wood fire. He ate slowly, trying to fathom the mystery of the god's benevolence. Of what need had he for a palace? He was a coolie, had always been a coolie, and a coolie he would remain until his life ceased.

Had he been endowed with this great house while his wife, Mei Mei, had walked the earth, he would have been ten thousand times thankful for the blessing. It would have meant jewels and silken robes for her. Now, since she had joined her ancestors except during those glorious hours of sleep when she returned to him, wealth meant nothing to him.

As a majestic form stood beside him, he looked up to behold the disgruntled God of Scented Pine Trees.

"Why do you still live in this hovel?" he asked brusquely.

"Because it is my house," was the simple reply. "I belong here."

"I have built you a palace that even would have delighted Kubla Khan. He, too, loved scented pine trees."

"He was an emperor; I, a coolie."

"You are a coolie no longer. Heed my words, live in the house you deserve. I have spoken; it is the least you can do to obey."

Fo Wen found the conversation distasteful. He was amazed that he felt so little awe in the presence of this god whom he had worshipped for so many years. He thought of the words of Lao Tzu:

Supreme virtue is like pure water.

It is beneficial to all and harmful to none.

It seeks the lowly places abhorred by men.

He, too, had dwelt in the lowly places yet the God of Scented Pine Trees wished to lift him up to the cold lonely heights of grandeur. Possession of earthly treasures is not enough. If the mind be not fed, what use a fat sleek body! Again he thought of Lao Tzu:

The wise man retires quietly from the outer world.

It is then that he experiences the Divine Tao.

When soul and spirit are harmoniously united

They will ever remain one.

So was it with Fo Wen and his wife, Mei Mei. She had dwelt with him happily for years in the mud and bamboo hut. To him it sang gently of her presence. Here she was near him. He wished no other abode.

But the God of Scented Pine Trees was urgent. Why should the welfare of one poor coolie mean so much to him?

"Tell me," he asked abruptly, "were you once, long ages ago, a member of the Fo clan?"

The god shuddered at the mere thought of such a thing.

"I am an immortal," he said haughtily. "Immortals belong to no clan."

"Then why do you bestow gifts upon me?"

"I am your god. You worship me. You are indeed a worthy man."

"And do you bestow gifts on all who worship you?"

That was a poser. The god might have answered yes with more than a modicum of truth, for Fo Wen was his only worshipper, the slender thread that guarded his divinity.

The God of Scented Pine Trees spoke slowly. "I have come to you because none other is more worthy. You live righteously."

"So do multitudes of coolies in China. He who bears gifts without reason is surely subject to much doubt."

"Wealth means nothing to me. See, I put out my hand and there are gold pieces in it, at my will they appear."

"A magician!"

"In a way," the god conceded. "However, could men live without magic—the magic of flowers, the magic of the little rain of China gently falling,

the magic of the night sky, the magic of the caress of a beloved woman, the magic of sleep when day's work is over?"

Fo Wen added, "And greatest of all, the magic of dreams."

"Through all the years you have worshipped me, I have heeded your prayers with compassion. When you burnt incense sticks they were pleasant to my nostrils. I have watched over you diligently that no harm might befall you."

"Yet the greatest disaster struck me."

"I know nothing of disaster."

"My wife has gone from me to her ancestors."

"Was that such a calamity? Why, in yonder house I have placed concubines for your enjoyment so beautiful they put flowers to shame. They belong to you. They are a hundred times more beautiful than your wife. Go to them."

"I want them not. My wife was the most gracious of women. She was attuned to my every wish. Her passing was sorrow beyond words."

The god noticed tears in the eyes of Fo Wen.

"Weeping is for women," he said scornfully.

"The loss of such a woman is occasion enough for weeping."

"Bah!" spat out the god. "Was she such a good wife; did she bear you children?"

"She was the best of wives. That she was childless she could not help. Even though you are a god, say no more against her, else I may curse you."

The God of Scented Pine Trees was in a panic. There was nothing god-like in the manner in which he fawned over Fo Wen. He repeated over and over again that all he wished to do was to show how great was his benevolence. He wanted Fo Wen to be a rich man since his character was so strong and noble.

Fo Wen felt ill at ease. He disliked the god to debase himself before him. In an effort to get out of an untenable position, he promised that that night he would sleep in the palace. At that the god departed triumphantly, hollow triumph though it was, for he had been very close to ignominy.

Fo Wen walked across the garden reluctantly, to the sleeping quarters of the master of the house, but he felt little like a master, more like a slave, the slave of the God of Scented Pine Trees. What kind of a god was this who insisted on controlling the actions of his worshippers? Far better was old Lao Tzu who wrote for all within the Four Seas:

The Infinite Tao produces and sustains all things.

It claims nothing of what it has produced.

It acts with loving wisdom, without desiring reward,

It possesses all power

Yet it does not seek to control. . . .

No wonder throughout China so many people were Taoists, regarding Lao Tzu with complete devotion. Truly, Lao Tzu was a philosopher worth revering. He gave so much food for reflection and asked nothing in return.

To please the God of Scented Pine Trees, though with considerable reluctance, he entered the room for sleeping. It was of an elegance that quite captured his breath. A pale lantern hung from the azure blue ceiling like a summer moon. The green rug was as thick and soft as dew-drenched grass at daybreak.

On the walls were written pictures. One in exquisite brush strokes: "How cool moonbeams drip from bamboo leaves." Another, "The color of distant hills—oh, those chrysanthemums!" He meditated a moment before them. Their eloquence he could appreciate. Like all Chinese he had the profoundest respect for the written character.

Quickly he slipped out of his clothes, stretched out on the kong and drew the silk coverlets over him, nor did he pay any attention to the large golden dragon that was embroidered upon it. Sleep should have come to him at once, for he was very tired, but his eyes did not close. First it was the pale light of the lantern that annoyed him. He was used to sleeping in darkness. The silk coverlets made him uncomfortable. The soft slinkiness was repulsive, almost like a slimy snake's skin. And he wondered why he had permitted himself to be flayed with words into this pretense of grandeur. He was but a coolie, a coolie who loved poetry, flowers, sunsets, the natural loveliness of life. What kind of a god was this God of Scented Pine Trees who forced him into doing that which was abhorrent to him?

He rose from the kong, put on his simple blue clothes and returned to hut. He stretched out on the bare earth and sighed contentedly. Sleep came to him at once. And now, in his dreams, his wife was beside him and the night was tender with perfume and sweet music.

The joy of peace and morning was on the land when he awakened. He walked to the door of the hut and breathed deeply of the clear, cool air. What need had any man for greater riches? He thought ruefully of the God of Scented Pine Trees whom he had worshipped for so many years. Now all that was ended. He would worship him no more, for he was an advocate of false doctrines. He knew nothing of the greatness of simple things, the joy of humility. What need had he for a false god, when there was so much in nature that was fine and true?

Coming toward him was a familiar fat figure, though not wearing his elaborate robes. Now he was arrayed in rags. He prostrated himself before Fo Wen and touched his forehead to the ground.

"Permit me to worship you, O Mighty Sage," he said fervently. "You were the sole remaining worshipper I had. That was why I erected this house for you. I was not satisfied with humble devotion. I wanted to be kowtowed to by a man of prominence. But now all this is over, and I have been flung down from the high places of the gods and reduced to the status of mere mortal. Nor am I dismayed, for I shall follow your guidance and your teachings. You have shown me the meaning of devotion. And so I prostrate myself before you in adoration."

Fo Wen felt strangely uplifted as though he could climb to the sky and

walk endlessly among the stars without fatigue. But he checked the impulse. Better far to keep his feet deep-rooted in the earth, even as do scented pine trees. Nevertheless, inexplicably, a sudden change had come over the face of the morning.

His vision was more acute, he could see far distances. Far into the deep blue sky could he see unto realms of eternal solitude and peace. Though the sun was well up, he could behold the moon and the stars, too, shining with breathtaking brilliance. The air was filled with music and voices softly singing. A hand, slim and tender touched his cheek and he knew that his wife was near him. This was as it should be, for death is as real as life and occasionally more comforting.

That day, Fo Wen did not depart for the docks to take up his usual back-breaking toil. The ex-god went in his place. He wished as far as possible to walk in the footsteps of the coolie who had been the last of his worshippers. Perhaps on that path he would find that which he sought, the way back again to the eternal mountains of the gods.

Fo Wen repaired to the pine tree that stood a short distance outside the walls of the palace. It was a perfect morning to give over to quiet reflection. The sun was warm, the sky a rapturous blue. The pine trees had never been sweeter scented. And he thought of the Emperor Ming Miang of the Tang Dynasty; how he had fed the poor by having tubs of rice set out in the market-places for distribution among the hungry. That is what he would like to do. At once there was a large tub of rice standing near him, and a beggar was approaching for alms. Unto this man Fo Wen gave a half sheng measure of rice, sufficient to keep him fed for some time. And the beggar bent low before him, murmuring a prayer. "Thank you, noble god, for this great gift."

Fo Wen was warmed by his words. This was the thing he had always longed to do, had he been able to afford it. That day he bestowed rice on many people, thereby giving them the gift of life, for rice is the life blood of China. It is more precious than gold, ivory or carved jade.

All through the day, Fo Wen distributed rice to the poor, and people came to him in ever-increasing throngs, nor did the tub ever become empty. And all who came kowtowed before him in gratitude and prayer, for surely this must be a god who showed such great generosity and compassion. Occasionally Fo Wen uttered bits of verse which the people snatched at eagerly. Thus were they doubly fed.

Day after day, Fo Wen distributed rice under the scented pine tree, and more and more people came to worship at his shrine—a single pine tree. Though he knew his magical powers were increasing daily, he made no effort to disport himself on the mountains of the gods, neither did he wear fine raiment. He still wore the blue clothes that were worn by uncounted millions of Chinese, for he preferred to walk among men that his gifts might be used to ease poverty. And beside him always was a slender woman whose smile was wonderfully sweet.

# *The Mystery of the Sargasso*

by William Hope Hodgson

*The original title of this story was "The Mystery of the Derelict" and we changed that last word to avoid confusion with the author's more famous "The Derelict." At one time the Sargasso Sea used to be the object of many novels and stories, and the legend of the graveyard of lost ships gripped the mind of the imaginative. This is not a story of that watery cemetery—which existed only in the minds of landlubbers—but of the real Sargasso as seamen knew it—a strange area of floating seaweed, mysterious in origin, which may have provided grounds for sailors' yarns such as this one.*

*A*

LL the night had the four-masted ship, *Tarawak*, lain motionless in the drift of the Gulf Stream; for she had run into a "calm patch"—into a stark calm which had lasted now for two days and nights.

On every side, had it been light, might have been seen dense masses of floating gulf-weed, studying the ocean even to the distant horizon. In places, so large were the weed-masses that they formed long, low banks, that by daylight, might have been mistaken for low-lying land.

Upon the lee side of the poop, Duthie, one of the 'prentices, leaned with his elbows upon the rail, and stared out across the hidden sea, to where in the Eastern horizon showed the first pink and lemon streamers of the dawn—faint, delicate streaks and washes of colour.

A period of time passed, and the surface of the leeward sea began to show—a great expanse of grey, touched with odd, wavering belts of silver. And everywhere the black specks and islets of the weed.

Presently, the red dome of the sun protruded itself into sight above the dark rim of the horizon; and, abruptly, the watching Duthie saw something—a great, shapeless bulk that lay some miles away to starboard, and showed black and distinct against the gloomy red mass of the rising sun.

"Something in sight to loard, Sir," he informed the Mate, who was lean-

ing, smoking, over the rail that run across the break of the poop. "I can't just make out what it is."

The Mate rose from his easy position, stretched himself, yawned, and came across to the boy.

"Whereabouts, Toby?" he asked, wearily, and yawning again.

"There, Sir," Duthie—alias Toby—"broad away on the beam, and right in the track of the sun. It looks something like a big houseboat, or a haystack."

The Mate stared in the direction indicated, and saw the thing which puzzled the boy, and immediately the tiredness went out of his eyes and face.

"Pass me the glasses off the skylight, Toby," he commanded, and the youth obeyed.

After the Mate had examined the strange object through his binoculars for, maybe, a minute, he passed them to Toby, telling him to take a "squint," and say what he made of it.

"Looks like an old powder-hulk, Sir," exclaimed the lad, after awhile, and to this description the Mate nodded agreement.

Later, when the sun had risen somewhat, they were able to study the derelict with more exactness. She appeared to be a vessel of an exceedingly old type, mastless, and upon the hull of which had been built a roof-like superstructure; the use of which they could not determine. She was lying just within the borders of one of the weed-banks, and all her side was splotched with a greenish growth.

It was her position, within the borders of the weed, that suggested to the puzzled Mate, how so strange and unseaworthy looking a craft had come so far abroad into the greatness of the ocean. For, suddenly, it occurred to him that she was neither more nor less than a derelict from the vast Sargasso Sea—a vessel that had, possibly, been lost to the world, scores and scores of years gone, perhaps hundreds. The suggestion touched the Mate's thoughts with solemnity, and he fell to examining the ancient hulk with an even greater interest, and pondering on all the lonesome and awful years that must have passed over her, as she had lain desolate and forgotten in that grim cemetery of the ocean.

Through all that day, the derelict was an object of the most intense interest to those aboard the *Tarauak*, every glass in the ship being brought into use to examine her. Yet, though within no more than some six or seven miles of her, the Captain refused to listen to the Mate's suggestions that they should put a boat into the water, and pay the stranger a visit; for he was a cautious man, and the glass warned him that a sudden change might be expected in the weather; so that he would have no one leave the ship on any unnecessary business. But, for all that he had caution, curiosity was by no means lacking in him, and his telescope, at intervals, was turned on the ancient hulk through all the day.

Then, it would be about six bells in the second dog watch, a sail was sighted astern, coming up steadily but slowly. By eight bells they were able

to make out that a small barque was bringing the wind with her; her yards squared, and every stitch set. Yet the night had advanced apace, and it was nigh to eleven o'clock before the wind reached those aboard the *Tarawak*. When at last it arrived, there was a slight rustling and quaking of canvas, and odd creaks here and there in the darkness amid the gear, as each portion of the running and standing rigging took up the strain.

Beneath the bows, and alongside, there came gentle rippling noises, as the vessel gathered way; and so, for the better part of the next hour, they slid through the water at something less than a couple of knots in the sixty minutes.

To starboard of them, they could see the red light of the little barque, which had brought up the wind with her, and was now forging slowly ahead, being better able evidently than the big, heavy *Tarawak* to take advantage of so slight a breeze.

About a quarter to twelve, just after the relieving watch had been roused, lights were observed to be moving to and fro upon the small barque, and by midnight it was palpable that, through some cause or other, she was dropping astern.

When the Mate arrived on deck, to relieve the Second, the latter officer informed him of the possibility that something unusual had occurred aboard the barque, telling of the lights about her decks,\* and how that, in the last quarter of an hour, she had begun to drop astern.

On hearing the Second Mate's account, the First sent one of the 'prentices for his night-glasses, and, when they were brought, studied the other vessel intently, that is, so well as he was able through the darkness; for, even through the night-glasses, she showed only as a vague shape, surmounted by the three dim towers of her masts and sails.

Suddenly, the Mate gave out a sharp exclamation; for, beyond the barque, there was something else shown dimly in the field of vision. He studied it with great intentness, ignoring for the instant, the Second's queries as to what it was that had caused him to exclaim.

All at once, he said, with a little note of excitement in his voice:—

"The derelict! The barque's run into the weed around that old hooker!"

The Second Mate gave a mutter of surprised assent, and slapped the rail.

"That's it!" he said. "That's why we're passing her. And that explains the lights. If they're not fast in the weed, they've probably run slap into the blessed derelict!"

"One thing," said the Mate, lowering his glasses, and beginning to fumble for his pipe, "she won't have had enough way on her to do much damage."

The Second Mate, who was still peering through his binoculars, murmured an absent agreement, and continued to peer. The Mate, for his part,

\* Unshaded lights are never allowed about the decks at night, as they are likely to blind the vision of the officer of the watch.—W. H. H.

filled and lit his pipe, remarking meanwhile to the unhearing Second, that the light breeze was dropping.

Abruptly, the Second Mate called his superior's attention, and in the same instant, so it seemed, the failing wind died entirely away, the sails settling down into ruckles, with little rustles and flutters of sagging canvas.

"What's up?" asked the Mate, and raised his glasses.

"There's something queer going on over yonder," said the Second. "Look at the lights moving about, and—— Did you see *that*?"

The last portion of his remark came out swiftly, with a sharp accentuation of the last word.

"What?" asked the Mate, staring hard.

"They're shooting," replied the Second. "Look! There again!"

"Rubbish!" said the Mate, a mixture of disbelief and doubt in his voice.

With the falling of the wind, there had come a great silence upon the sea. And, abruptly, from far across the water, sounded the distant, dullish thud of a gun, followed almost instantly by several minute, but sharply defined, reports like the cracking of a whip out in the darkness.

"Jove!" cried the Mate, "I believe you're right." He paused and stared. "There!" he said. "I saw the flashes then. They're firing from the poop, I believe. . . . I must call the Old Man."

He turned and ran hastily down into the saloon, knocked on the door of the Captain's cabin, and entered. He turned up the lamp, and, shaking his superior into wakefulness, told him of the thing he believed to be happening aboard the barque:

"It's mutiny, Sir; they're shooting from the poop. We ought to do something——" The Mate said many things, breathlessly; for he was a young man; but the Captain stopped him, with a quietly lifted hand.

"I'll be up with you in a minute, Mr. Johnson," he said, and the Mate took the hint, and ran up on deck.

Before the minute had passed, the Skipper was on the poop, and staring through his night-glasses at the barque and the derelict. Yet now, aboard of the barque, the lights had vanished, and there showed no more the flashes of discharging weapons—only there remained the dull, steady red glow of the port sidelight; and, behind it, the night-glasses showed the shadowy outline of the vessel.

The Captain put questions to the Mates, asking for further details.

"It all stopped while the Mate was calling you, Sir," explained the Second. "We could hear the shots quite plainly."

"They seemed to be using a gun as well as their revolvers," interjected the Mate, without ceasing to stare into the darkness.

For awhile the three of them continued to discuss the matter, whilst down on the maindeck the two watches clustered along the starboard rail, and a low hum of talk rose, fore and aft.

Presently, the Captain and the Mates came to a decision. If there had been a mutiny, it had been brought to its conclusion, whatever that conclusion

might be, and no interference from those aboard the *Tarawak*, at that period, would be likely to do good. They were utterly in the dark—in more ways than one—and, for all they knew, there might not even have been any mutiny. If there had been a mutiny, and the mutineers had won, then they had done their worst; whilst if the officers had won well and good. They had managed to do so without help. Of course, if the *Tarawak* had been a man-of-war with a large crew, capable of mastering any situation, it would have been a simple matter to send a powerful, armed boat's crew to inquire; but as she was merely a merchant vessel, undermanned, as is the modern fashion, they must go warily. They would wait for the morning, and signal. In a couple of hours it would be light. Then they would be guided by circumstances.

The Mate walked to the break of the poop, and sang out to the men:—

"Now then, my lads, you'd better turn in, the watch below, and have a sleep; we may be wanting you by five bells."

There was a muttered chorus of "i, i, Sir," and some of the men began to go forrad to the fo'cas'le, but others of the watch below remained, their curiosity overmastering their desire for sleep.

On the poop, the three officers leaned over the starboard rail, chatting in a desultory fashion, as they waited for the dawn. At some little distance hovered Duthie, who, as eldest 'prentice just out of his time, had been given the post of acting Third Mate.

Presently, the sky to starboard began to lighten with the solemn coming of the dawn. The light grew and strengthened, and the eyes of those in the *Tarawak* scanned with growing intentness that portion of the horizon, where showed the red and dwindling glow of the barque's sidelight.

Then, it was in that moment when all the world is full of the silence of the dawn, something passed over the quiet sea, coming out of the East—very faint, long-drawn-out, screaming, piping noise. It might almost have been the cry of a little wind wandering out of the dawn across the sea—a ghostly, piping skirl, so attenuated and elusive was it; but there was in it a weird, almost threatening note, that told the three on the poop it was no wind that made so dree and inhuman a sound.

The noise ceased, dying out in an indefinite, mosquito-like shrilling, far and vague and minutely shrill. And so came the silence again.

"I heard that, last night, when they were shooting," said the Second Mate, speaking very slowly, and looking first at the Skipper and then at the Mate. "It was when you were below, calling the Captain," he added.

"Ssh!" said the Mate, and held up a warning hand; but though they listened, there came no further sound; and so they fell to disjointed questionings, and guessed their answers, as puzzled men will. And ever and anon, they examined the barque through their glasses; but without discovering anything of note, save that, when the light grew stronger, they perceived that her jibboom had struck through the superstructure of the derelict, tearing a considerable gap therein.

Presently, when the day had sufficiently advanced, the Mate sung out to the Third, to take a couple of the 'prentices, and pass up the signal flags and the code book. This was done, and a "hoist" made; but those in the barque took not the slightest heed; so that finally the Captain bade them make up the flags and return them to the locker.

After that, he went down to consult the glass, and when he reappeared, he and the Mates had a short discussion, after which, orders were given to hoist out the starboard life-boat. This, in the course of half an hour, they managed; and, after that, six of the men and two of the 'prentices were ordered into her.

Then half a dozen rifles were passed down, with ammunition, and the same number of cutlasses. These were all apportioned among the men, much to the disgust of the two apprentices, who were aggrieved that they should be passed over; but their feelings altered when the Mate descended into the boat, and handed them each a loaded revolver, warning them, however, to play no "monkey tricks" with the wapons.

Just as the boat was about to push off, Duthie, the eldest 'prentice, came scrambling down the side ladder, and jumped for the after thwart. He landed, and sat down, laying the rifle which he had brought, in the stern; and, after that, the boat put off for the barque.

There were now ten in the boat, and all well armed, so that the Mate had a certain feeling of comfort that we would be able to meet any situation that was likely to arise.

After nearly an hour's hard pulling, the heavy boat had been brought within some two hundred yards of the barque, and the Mate sung out to the men to lie on their oars for a minute. Then he stood up and shouted to the people on the barque; but though he repeated his cry of "Ship ahoy!" several times, there came no reply.

He sat down, and motioned to the men to give way again, and so brought the boat nearer the barque by another hundred yards. Here, he hailed again; but still receiving no reply, he stooped for his binoculars, and peered for awhile through them at the two vessels—the ancient derelict, and the modern sailing-vessel.

The latter had driven clean in over the weed, her stern being perhaps some two score yards from the edge of the bank. Her jibboom, as I have already mentioned, had pierced the green-blotched superstructure of the derelict, so that her cutwater had come very close to the grass-grown side of the hulk.

That the derelict was indeed a very ancient vessel, it was now easy to see; for at this distance the Mate could distinguish which was hull, and which superstructure. Her stern rose up to a height considerably above her bows, and possessed galleries, coming round the counter. In the window frames some of the glass still remained; but others were securely shuttered, and some missing, frames and all, leaving dark holes in the stern. And everywhere grew the dank, green growth, giving to the beholder a queer sense of repulsion. Indeed, there was that about the whole of the ancient craft, that repelled

in a curious way—something elusive—a remoteness from humanity that was vaguely abominable.

The Mate put down his binoculars, and drew his revolver, and, at the action, each one in the boat gave an instinctive glance to his own weapon. Then he sung out to them to give-way, and steered straight for the weed. The boat struck it, with something of a sog; and, after that, they advanced slowly, yard by yard, only with considerable labour.

They reached the counter of the barque, and the Mate held out his hand for an oar. This, he leaned up against the side of the vessel, and a moment later was swarming quickly up it. He grasped the rail, and swung himself aboard; then, after a swift glance fore and aft, gripped the blade of the oar, to steady it, and bade the rest follow as quickly as possible, which they did, the last man bringing up the painter with him, and making it fast to a cleat.

Then commenced a rapid search through the ship. In several places about the maindeck they found broken lamps, and aft on the poop, a shotgun, three revolvers, and several capstan-bars lying about the poop-deck. But though they pried into every possible corner, lifting the hatches, and examining the lazarette, not a human creature was to be found—the barque was absolutely deserted.

After the first rapid search, the Mate called his men together; for there was an uncomfortable sense of danger in the air, and he felt that it would be better not to straggle. Then, he led the way forward, and set up on to the t'gallant fo'cas'le head. Here, finding the port sidelight still burning, he sent over the screen, as it were mechanically, lifted the lamp, opened it, and blew out the flames; then replaced the affair on its socket.

After that, he climbed into the bows, and out along the jibboom, beckoning to the others to follow, which they did, no man saying a word, and all holding their weapons handily; for each felt the oppressiveness of the Incomprehensible about them.

The Mate reached the hole in the great superstructure, and passed inside, the rest following. Here they found themselves in what looked something like a great, gloomy barracks, the floor of which was the deck of an ancient craft. The superstructure, as seen from the inside, was a very wonderful piece of work, being beautifully shored and fixed; so that at one time it must have possessed immense strength; though now it was all rotted, and showed many a gape and rip. In one place, near the centre, or midships part, was a sort of platform, high up, which the Mate conjectured might have been used as a "look-out"; though the reason for the prodigious superstructure itself, he could not imagine.

Having searched the decks of this craft, he was preparing to go below, when, suddenly, Duthie caught him by the sleeve, and whispered to him, tensely, to listen. He did so, and heard the thing that had attracted the attention of the youth—it was a low, continuous shrill whining that was rising from out of the dark hull beneath their feet, and, abruptly, the Mate was aware that there was an intensely disagreeable animal-like smell in the

air. He had noticed it, in a subconscious fashion, when entering through the broken superstructure; but now, suddenly, he was *aware* of it.

Then, as he stood there hesitating, the whining noise rose all at once into a piping, screaming squeal, that filled all the space in which they were inclosed, with an awful, inhuman and threatening clamour. The Mate turned and shouted at the top of his voice to the rest, to retreat to the barque, and he, himself, after a further quick nervous glance round, hurried towards the place where the end of the barque's jibboom protruded in across the decks.

He waited, with strained impatience, glancing ever behind him, until all were off the derelict, and then sprang swiftly on to the spar that was their bridge to the other vessel. Even as he did so, the squealing died away into a tiny shrilling, twittering sound, that made him glance back; for the suddenness of the quiet was as effective as though it had been a loud noise. What he saw, seemed to him in that first instant so incredible and monstrous, that he was almost too shaken to cry out. Then he raised his voice in a shout of warning to the men, and a frenzy of haste shook him in every fibre, as he scrambled back to the barque, shouting ever to the men to get into the boat. For in that backward glance, he had seen the whole decks of the derelict a-move with living things—giant rats, thousands and tens of thousands of them; and so in a flash had come to an understanding of the disappearance of the crew of the barque.

He had reached the fo'cas'le head now, and was running for the steps, and behind him, making all the long slanting length of the jibboom black, were the rats, racing after him. He made one leap to the maindeck, and ran. Behind, sounded a queer multitudinous pattering noise, swiftly surging upon him. He reached the poop steps, and as he sprang up them, felt a savage bite on his left calf. He was on the poop deck now, and running with a stagger. A score of great rats leapt around him, and half a dozen hung grimly to his back, whilst the one that had gripped his calf, flogged madly from side to side as he raced on. He reached the rail, gripped it, and vaulted clean over and down into the weed.

The rest were already in the boat, and strong hands and arms hove him aboard, whilst the others of the crew succeeded in getting their little craft round from the ship. The rats still clung to the Mate, but a few blows with a cutlass eased him of his murderous burden. Above them, making the rails and half-round of the poop black and alive, raced thousands of rats.

The boat was now about an oar's length from the barque, and, suddenly, Duthie screamed out that *they* were coming. In the same instant, nearly a hundred of the largest rats launched themselves at the boat. Most fell short, into the weed; but over a score reached the boat, and sprang savagely at the men, and there was a minute's hard slashing and smiting, before the brutes were destroyed.

Once more the men resumed their task of urging their way through the weed, and so in a minute or two, had come to within some fathoms of the edge, working desperately. Then a fresh terror broke upon them. Those rats

which had missed their leap, were now all about the boat, and leaping in from the weed, running up the oars, and scrambling in over the sides, and, as each one got inboard, straight for one of the crew it went; so that they were all bitten and be-bled in a score of places.

These ensued a short but desperate fight, and then, when the last of the beasts had been hacked to death, the men lay once more to the task of heaving the boat clear of the weed.

A minute passed, and they had come almost to the edge, when Duthie cried out, to look; and at that, all turned to stare at the barque, and perceived the thing that had caused the 'prentice to cry out; for the rats were leaping down into the weed in black multitudes, making the great weed-fronds quiver, as they burled themselves in the direction of the boat. In an incredibly short space of time, all the weed between the boat and the barque was alive with the little monsters, coming at breakneck speed.

The Mate let out a shout, and, snatching an oar from one of the men, leapt into the stern of the boat, and commenced to thrash the weed with it, whilst the rest laboured infernally to pluck the boat forth into the open sea. Yet, despite their mad efforts, and the death-dealing blows of the Mate's great fourteen-foot oar, the black, living mass were all about the boat, and scrambling aboard in scores, before she was free of the weed. As the boat shot into the clear water, the Mate gave out a great curse, and, dropping his oar, began to pluck the brutes from his body with his bare hands, casting them into the sea. Yet, fast almost as he freed himself, others sprang upon him, so that in another minute he was like to have been pulled down, for the boat was alive and swarming with the pests, but that some of the men got to work with their cutlasses, and literally slashed the brutes to pieces, sometimes killing several with a single blow. And thus, in a while, the boat was freed once more; though it was a sorely wounded and frightened lot of men that manned her.

The mate himself took an oar, as did all those who were able. And so they rowed slowly and painfully away from that hateful derelict, whose crew of monsters even then made the weed all of a-heave with hideous life.

From the *Tarawak* came urgent signals for them to haste; by which the Mate knew that the storm, which the Captain had feared, must be coming down upon the ship, and so he spurred each one to greater endeavour, until, at last, they were under the shadow of their own vessel, with very thankful hearts, and bodies, bleeding, tired and faint.

Slowly and painfully, the boat's crew scrambled up the side-ladder, and the boat was hoisted aboard; but they had no time then to tell their tale; for the storm was upon them.

It came half an hour later, sweeping down in a cloud of white fury from the Eastward, and blotting out all vestiges of the mysterious derelict and the little barque which had proved her victim. And after that, for a weary day as night, they battled with the storm. When it passed, nothing was to be seen, either of the two vessels or of the weed which had studded the sea before the

storm; for they had been blown many a score of leagues to the Westward of the spot, and so had no further chance—nor, I ween, inclination—to investigate further the mystery of that strange old derelict of a past time, and her habitants of rats.

Yet, many a time, and in many fo'cas'les has this story been told; and many a conjecture has been passed as to how came that ancient craft abroad there in the ocean. Some have suggested—as indeed I have made bold to put forth as fact—that she must have drifted out of the lonesome Sargasso Sea. And, in truth, I cannot but think this the most reasonable supposition. Yet, of the rats that evidently dwelt in her, I have no reasonable explanation to offer. Whether they were true ship's rats, or a species that is to be found in the weed-haunted plains and islets of the Sargasso Sea, I cannot say. It may be that they are the descendants of rats that lived in ships long centuries lost in the Weed Sea, and which have learned to live among the weed, forming new characteristics, and developing fresh powers and instincts. Yet I cannot say; for I speak entirely without authority, and do but tell this story as it is told in the fo'cas'le of many an old-time sailing ship—that dark, brine-tainted place where the young men learn somewhat of the mysteries of the all mysterious sea.

THE END

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